

520
Starved

To Miss Lide, hoping she will
enjoy this little book (in a
measure,) as I know her full

No!

E. W. Wilson

Sept. 1913



THIS BOOK

BELONGS TO

Lide McPaid



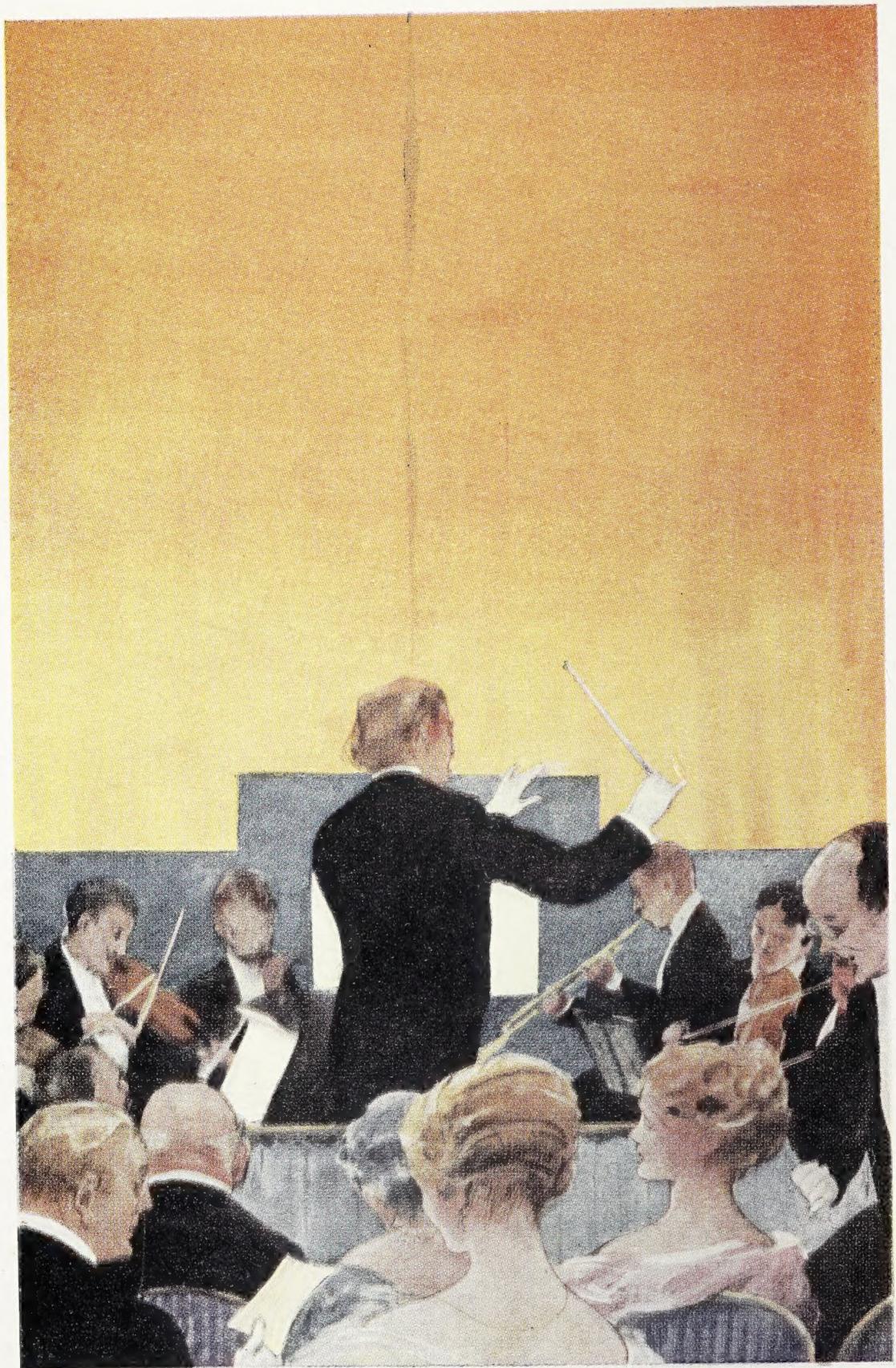
HOFFMAN'S CHANCE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PILKINGTON
THE CONFECTIONERS (with JOHN FAIR-
BAIRN)
THE PURSUIT OF THE PRESIDENT
THE VICTIM AND THE VOTERY
BOOM
A PRISONER IN SPAIN
THE REVOLT AT ROSKELLY'S
THE DEVIL IN SOLUTION
OLD ENOUGH TO KNOW BETTER
AN ANGLER AT LARGE
SAVE US FROM OUR FRIENDS



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— THE OVERTURE BEGAN —

HOFFMAN'S CHANCE

BY WILLIAM CAINE



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TO
OSBORNE ROBERTS

This story may remind you of some experiences which we share and which, without you, I should never have known. Though they were disappointing, they were useful to both of us ; indeed, as far as I am concerned, they were the real beginning of my life. Out of them came, very soon, that which is dearest and most helpful to me in all the world. I should be an ungrateful dog if I did not offer you this book.

One word more. Though very ignorant of music, I have taken a musician for my hero. It is likely, then, that you will be tempted to smile here and there, where your amusement (after that fashion) is not intended ; but when this happens, try to sink the expert maker of lovely melodies in the friend, and believe that though I have sinned in some places through lack of knowledge, I have done my best everywhere to capture your approval.

Always yours,
WILLIAM CAINE.

Feb., 1912.

HOFFMAN'S CHANCE

HOFFMAN'S CHANCE

CHAPTER I

I

CUST was good enough to be very sorry: but they had got a man. Five minutes after the telegram had gone to Hoffman they'd telephoned to say so. Cust was very sorry.

"That's all right, Cust," said Hoffman. "Don't apologise, old boy. But this is the second time you've dragged me up here with a wire to tell me that a shop's filled, and I'm not often exactly in a sweat to get that kind of news, you know. I wasn't to-day. And I point out to you that you've kept me waiting out there in the saloon for half an hour to give it to me. I like you pretty well, Cust, but I don't think you amount to much as an agent."

He was too angry to mind what he said to Cust. Cust, on the other hand, was too sagacious to seem to mind what anybody said to him. He smiled, putting up a soothing palm.

"My dear boy——"

"Oh, that's all right, Cust," said Hoffman as he went out through the door of the private room, slamming it.

The passage and staircase were full of people, men and women, the overflow of the crowd in the saloon—the big outer office where Cust's clients waited on the convenience of Cust—and the air was horrid with cheap tobacco and strong scents; for to-day Cust was gathering a chorus for the tour of some musical play or other, the same play, no doubt, of which Hoffman had missed the conductorship. Everywhere the choristers leaned against the walls or sat on the stairs, talking together loudly in defiance of the big Silence card which hung over the door of the agent's private room. Most of them had been there or thereabouts since

ten in the morning, and it was now nearly four ; but they talked on indefatigably, exchanging anecdotes and the gossip of their business, the only forms of articulate utterance possible to choristers when they are not singing their words. Only a very few showed that they were tired. There was one, a white-faced little woman who sat asleep in the corner by the top of the staircase. Her feet were rather in the way of the people who passed her, but everybody stepped carefully at that place and she was not wakened. There was also a young fellow, standing, whose face was one heavy scowl because his boots were so tight, the new boots which he had put on in order to impress Cust. "Blast these boots !" he was whispering to himself over and over again.

Hoffman avoided the feet of the white-faced little woman and went down the stairs out into Bracegirdle Street.

The day was what the newspapers on the following morning call The Coming of Summer. May was half over and hitherto only a moderate warmth had been noticeable in London. But now the sun had come out to some purpose, and with it the town had suddenly blossomed into straw hats, white waistcoats, diaphanous blouses and parasols. Bracegirdle Street was glorious with summer clothing. Out in the sunlight, among the gay actors and actresses, long, lean Hoffman, with his rusty wideawake and his suit of polished blue serge, looked particularly unprosperous. It was, however, no feeling of shame which caused him suddenly to turn in at the door of The Tumblers, for I suppose there was no person then in that street less conscious of the figure he or she was cutting than was Hoffman.

But suddenly he thirsted.

When a telegram, urging instant appearance at the office of a theatrical agent, reaches the hands of one who desires ardently to direct the music of a play—any play—he does not dawdle while he goes to attend the summons. Hoffman had come in a motor-cab which had cost him a great deal of money, two shillings and eightpence, no less ; yet I doubt if his thirst would have been any greater at this moment if he had run all the way from the north end of Camden Town through the strong heat of that afternoon.

The excitement of the dangled opportunity and the irritation of his thirty minutes' wait had created a fever in him of which he had become conscious only since Cust had dealt his easy blow.

Hoffman had to drink or, by blaspheming aloud, make an exhibition of himself.

The bar of The Tumblers was crowded and it took him some little time to attract the notice of the blonde girl behind the counter. As she drew the glass of lager which he had ordered he heard his name called. "Mikky," someone was saying, "Mikky, old son." He looked about him and perceived, seated at a table against the staircase, a young man—an actor, he thought—with whose face he was tolerably familiar. Next moment he had the name for it. It was that ass, Tertius Ray. He gave him a nod sideways—he was in no mood to hear the gabble of any Tertius Ray—and turned to receive a long wet tumbler from the barmaid. This he put to his lips and drank half of it, very slowly.

Ray persisted. "Bring that over here, Mikky," he called. "Bring it over here, won't you?"

With the introduction of the beer Hoffman's mood had changed. He was aware of an idle hour with which Cust had presented him. Till five he was at a loose end. He could, of course, go straight to Leicester Square, on the off chance of Linda getting there earlier than they had agreed; but it was a chance that was very much "off." Unless some wonderful thing had happened she wouldn't be at the place before five. And if that wonderful thing had happened—if, that is to say, she had got a job—she wouldn't mind waiting a little. He thought of the square, grilling in the sun, and he was vividly conscious of the coolness of the place where he stood. Why should he hurry over this drink? Why not take it to the table and sit awhile with the harmless Ray? Not a bad sort of a fool, Ray; and—of this he assured himself—the man had provided himself with a host. Ray's prattle wouldn't cost anything.

He moved across the floor and shook Ray's hand.

"I want," the actor said, "to introduce you two musical gentlemen to each other. Permit me. Mr. Michael Hoffman, Mr. Bertram Orde. Two of the best." He raised

his hat slightly as he made the introduction, possibly with some idea that he was showing his good manners.

Hoffman now looked more closely at Ray's companion. This was a fair young fellow, perhaps twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. His hair was yellow and curly, and he grew a small gamboge-coloured moustache with waxed points. His flannel suit was cut in the latest mode, and he wore boots of that peculiar rich glossy brown which proclaims either the hand of a conscientious valet or the anxious personal care of their owner. A valuable pearl in Mr. Orde's necktie caused Hoffman to decide in favour of the valet. On the table in front of Mr. Orde lay a malacca cane with a gold knob, a pair of fresh suede gloves, and a hat of light grey felt, upside down. Hoffman, as he read the hatter's name, deduced from this also that he was in the presence of an opulent.

He sat down and drank more lager.

"Mr. Hoffman," Ray went on, speaking to Orde, "was going to wag the stick for us in 'The Girl from Guernsey.'"

"Ah," Orde murmured politely.

"A nice little piece, that—eh, Mikky? Pity it didn't have a show. What *I* say is, a man's a dirty dog who'll let rehearsals go on for three weeks and *then* refuse to sign the contract. Very helpful for a syndicate to have five thousand pounds walking out of the room after three weeks' rehearsals—what?"

"Must be," said Orde amiably.

Hoffman laughed sourly. "He showed his sense, anyway," he said. "That was a naughty lot of music."

"You simple old son," cried Ray. "Did you think it was the music that frightened him? It was that funny little pet Toosie B. She wanted more part and she couldn't get it. If that cuckoo Buckley had only built her up a bit she'd have been as sweet as jam, and the old man would have stayed in. But when an author absolutely refuses to give a girl a few little extra bits that she happens to want, and when that girl has five thousand quid by the ear, what can you expect? There's one comfort—it burst that particular Mr. Shakespeare all right, and all the others too."

"Did it?" said Hoffman indifferently. "I never heard that."

"Oh yes. They all went through the hoop one after the other. There was practically everything to pay for except the poor actors—theatre, scenery, dresses, all ordered. And you don't suppose they had any money, do you? What beats me is how that Buckley boy dared to stick out against Toosie B. and the others. I happen to know that they practically went on their knees to him to feed Toosie. They told him what would happen, and it did. Buckley must have been off his onion to think such a lot of himself. Must have imagined that the old man wanted to see the *play* put on. You wouldn't believe there were such fools around. Why, Orde, the blighter had only to write a couple of scenes—one couple of little old scenes for Toosie—and the contract would have been signed that evening—safe. And—lend me a cigarette, Orde—you never know—the piece might have caught on."

"Not with Toosie B. getting all the fat," said Hoffman.

"Oh," cried Ray, with extraordinary simplicity, "of course they'd have had to eliminate Toosie, practically, as soon as we'd started."

Hoffman laughed and lit a cigarette. "It's a sweet trade," he said.

"Have you done much in it?" Orde asked him.

"No. Just three attempts, and none of them came off. But I go on hoping."

"Oh, *you'll* be all right," cried Ray, "you're *clever*. You're a *musician*. They all said so in 'The Girl from Guernsey.' You'll get your chance one of these days, Mikky. And when you do, remember yours truly, Tertius Ray, reliable light baritone, suitable to understudy juvenile gentleman imitations a speciality, London engagements only when provincial not offered. What *you* doing now, Mikky?"

"I? Oh, nothing much. The usual thing. Lessons, accompaniments, banquets, ghost business—anything that comes along. Haven't got down to The Pictures *yet*. Might be doing a lot worse. I can't complain; though I do, of course."

"Thought I heard you were out with that frost of Robbie the Robber's."

" So I was—for three days ; the week he closed down at Sheffield. I got my money and my fare out of him, though. Shook them out of him, laddie."

" No ! " cried Ray. " Splendid ! You absolutely took your hands to Robbie the Robber ? "

" I absolutely did."

" He wanted some of that."

" He had it," said Hoffman, and finished his lager.

" What about the others ? They got out of it all right, didn't they ? At least I heard so."

" Oh yes, he paid the others," said Hoffman. " I'd been with him only three days, you see. I suppose he didn't think three days was worth talking about, let alone a fare from Sheffield."

Hoffman didn't explain how the others had got out of it as well as they did. He was quite pleased that anyone should know of his assault upon Robbie the Robber and its success, but he shrank from proclaiming his own responsibility for the payment of the company. The strange fellow was glad that his world should imagine him able to look after himself, but avoided letting it be known that he had threatened a trembling Jew manager with several horrid forms of death if the claims of other people were not satisfied in full.

" What is yours, Mr. Hoffman ? " asked Orde.

" Why, I'll have another lager, thank you," said Hoffman at once.

He hoped that Ray would be grateful to him. It was quite out of the question that Ray was buying the drinks, and Hoffman suspected that he had been summoned to the table more with the object of promoting the flow of liquor than from any real wish which the actor felt for his society. He didn't know Ray very well, but he knew him well enough for that. As for Orde, he did not so much as ask Ray if he would drink anything more, but called instantly for a lager and two other whiskies.

" Mr. Orde," said the actor, by way of payment for the coming gratification, " is a great man like yourself, Mikky. I expect you know his songs."

At once Hoffman became alert. This tow-headed Willie was a song-writer, was he ? Once again he took

stock of that rich pearl, that gold knob on the malacca. He thought he knew the names of all the song-writers who were likely to be able to buy things like these with the proceeds of their music ; and the name of Orde had so far never been upon the list. Unerringly he nosed the amateur, the dabbler ; he knew the breed well enough. Didn't he partly live on it ? And here was Ray drinking at the man's expense ; Ray, the cheapest kind of little actor. Hoffman felt that sudden warm hopeful glow which steals upon one when any opportunity of making money becomes, however dimly, visible.

"Why," he said cautiously, "of course I know Mr. Orde's *name*, but I don't think I've ever actually come across any of his *work*."

"What ?" cried Ray. "You haven't ? You astonish me. You absolutely astonish me, Mikky."

"He needn't," said Orde modestly. "I'm quite a nobody, Mr. Hoffman. I can just invent a little melody ; no more than that. Harmony's all beyond me."

"Harmony !" cried the actor. "Rats ! What's harmony ? Anybody can harmonise, can't they ? "

"Sure," said Hoffman. "It's only a matter of learning how."

"But melody—that's where the *soul* comes in. It's a *gift*, melody is," Ray informed them. "And a precious rare one, too. Orde's got it." He was racking his brains to remember the name of one—of only one song which Orde had published. One would be enough.

"I congratulate Mr. Orde," said Hoffman. "Where d'you publish ?" he asked.

Orde gave him a name which caused the musician's hopes of this well-dressed amateur to bound upwards. If it amused this Mr. Orde to publish his little tunes at his own expense, there seemed to be no reason why one, Michael Hoffman, as well as Messrs. Pagenbauer, shouldn't turn the strange fancy to account. Orde would have a ghost already, of course, but it was that ghost's business to keep hold of his man. It was very foolish of him to let such a valuable person out loose in strange public-houses where his rivals might at any time be met. Like every other decent person who has his living to make, Hoffman allowed

himself to think as little as possible about the effects upon his competitors of his own successes. Here, he reflected, was money to be made, and he meant to do his best to get some of it. The best cartridge for shooting amateurs is flattery. Hoffman loaded.

"If you've five minutes to spare," he said, "I'd like very much to hear some of your stuff. There's a piano upstairs, you know."

"Oh," said Orde, pleased, "it's awful piffle; really it is."

Mr. Ray, having nothing in the world to do with himself for the next year and a half, embraced Hoffman's proposition with joy. Nor did he forget that it is a custom, when gentlemen use the piano of a hotel, that refreshment should be served.

"Piffle?" he cried. "Ah! that's what *he* says. But you *wait*, Mikky; you wait till you *hear* it." He swallowed his whiskey and laid hold of Orde's arm. "Come on, old son," he said. Then, turning to the barmaid—"There's no one in the rehearsal room, is there?" he asked. She told them no, there wasn't.

II

While Orde paid for what had been drunk and made arrangements for a further supply of liquor, Ray and Hoffman mounted the stairs and entered the rehearsal room. Ray seized the opportunity to give his companion some important information.

"He's got a few tunes in his head, and he gets 'em put in order by a real musician, and then he pays Pagenbauers to print 'em and sends 'em round among his friends. He's just full of money; it oozes if you touch him. He's

a mug, of course, but he's a dear good fellow. I think writing's more in his line than music. He can do quite a nice little lyric now and then. I was singing in a small amateur one-act show that he did for a charity last winter at The Bijou. He paid for the whole thing, I believe, and he didn't seem to care how much it cost him. Split new scenery and everything A1. Teddy McKay managed it for him, and he and Mrs. Teddy had a month at Monte Carlo on the proceeds. They must have been enormous to last the Teddies for a month at Monte Carlo, don't you think? D'you know Teddy McKay?"

"No," said Hoffman. "Tell me about Orde's play."

"He wrote it with a man called Chalkley," said Ray, always delighted to give information. "Ever come across that merchant, Mikky? A rum 'un! Mad as a hatter, but a clever musician. Arthur Chalkley—little man with a deuce of a great hump on his back. Coughed all the time most horribly. Drank a lot, too."

"Yes," said Hoffman, "we were at Leipsic together. He died the other day, poor devil."

"Very wise of him," said Ray cheerfully. "He didn't enjoy life at all. Tried to, but couldn't."

"I suppose it was he who put this man Orde's stuff to rights," said Hoffman, leading Ray back to the desired line of talk.

"Very likely. Somebody had to, of course. I say, old man, what's the matter with *your* getting the job?"

"Oh, nothing at all," said Hoffman.

Following his musician's instinct he crossed the bare floor and sat down in front of the disreputable piano. He struck a few chords powerfully, and then began to run his fingers softly up and down the keyboard. He looked thoughtful, and once or twice he glanced impatiently towards the door.

"What was the dialogue like?" he asked, stopping his music.

Ray had secured the only armchair in the room and had drawn it up near the piano.

"What? In Orde's play?" he asked. "Oh, good enough to run a blue pencil through. I expect he wrote it himself. He was advertised to, anyway. And he used

to fake lyrics and bits of dialogue on the piano at rehearsals, and he was pretty smart at it. Lots of his lines got laughs ; but, of course, he had a houseful of pals."

"And the lyrics ? "

"Well, the lyrics were the best of it. He's got a turn for that line of goods, Mikky. He really has. I shouldn't wonder"—he leaned forward and put his mouth close to Hoffman's ear—"I shouldn't wonder, sonny, if you and he could--eh ? He's just made up of shekels, don't forget. He might be quite worth your while. And I happen to know he's meditating another play—a full-sized one. He was telling me as much just before you rolled in here. And not an amateur show, neither. That was why I called you over to us downstairs, Mikky. It was, I swear it was. You might easily do yourself some good with Orde. And I say," he concluded, pitifully enough, "if anything *should* come of it, you won't forget who introduced you, will you, old boy ? "

"Why," said Hoffman with a grin, "if I do I can rely on you to remind me, I expect, old boy."

Orde came in, imposing discretion. The song-writer carried three long cigars wrapped in gold paper. "I can't guarantee these," he said, "but they're the best that this house can provide. If you can't stick 'em, chuck 'em in the grate."

Ray had more reason than ever to congratulate himself on the inspiration which had caused him to introduce these two men to one another. He priced the cigars at from two shillings to half a crown apiece. The affability of Orde did not escape his notice, and vaguely he began to make plans for the outlay of a commission on the composer's royalties of a great London success.

"Now," said Hoffman, getting up. "The piano is with you, Mr. Orde."

Orde sat. "What shall I play ? " he asked as he ran white fingers through his curls. "Of course," he went on apologetically, "you understand, Hoffman, that I only vamp my things. You're sure to find any quantity of errors in my harmonies. But I can give you the general idea. Now this," and he produced some chords, "is a little setting of that Three Part Song in 'Puck of Pook's

Hill'—I only got the tune the other day, and I haven't really worked on it."

"Let's have it," said Hoffman rather grimly. He made a savage bite at the end of his cigar and sat down beside the table. He knew that song by heart, and (because he was a Sussex man) he groaned within himself for the sacrilege that was to come. But people who stand in need of money must suppress their fine feelings or starve—unless they have more than ordinary luck.

"Yes, old boy," cried Ray genially, "wade ahead. But first lend me a match, won't you?"

Orde gave him what he wanted and then began throatily to sing his setting of the Three Part Song.

Orde's music had that quality which is called, by courtesy, reminiscent. It aroused in the listener no emotions more serious than an irritation at his own inability to perceive the tunes which had inspired it. Michael Hoffman had heard too much music of the same class to worry himself with any futile search of the kind. He easily acquitted Orde of deliberate theft. Here was the music of no pirate; there wasn't enough boldness about it. It was just poor, unoriginal stuff, lively enough, catchy enough, tuneful enough—good enough to pay somebody to print it, and then to distribute gratis among an amiable acquaintance. But it didn't matter. Orde would never write anything to count.

Hoffman's only solid objection to the tune to which he listened was that it should dare to try to carry the words. He thought that vastly wicked of it. He endeavoured to shut his ears to the words, and to concentrate his attention wholly upon the music. He meant to astonish Orde presently.

Orde embarked upon the second verse.

"I've buried my heart in a ferny hill"

he sang sentimentally.

"Twix' a liddle low shaw an' a great high gill
On hop-bine yaller and wood smoke blue,
I reckon you'll keep her middlin' true!"

"Oh, my God!" thought Michael, "what should these things say to a moneyed mucker like him?"

"Immense!" shouted Ray. "Enormous. What did I say, Mikky?"

Orde went on pitilessly, without the slightest change in music or manner:

"I've loosed my mind for to out and run
On a marsh that was old when kings begun."

Hoffman forced himself violently to consider the possibilities which this tune, as it existed, presented to an accomplished musician. He refused to think any longer about the criminal nature of these proceedings.

The second verse over, Ray, supposing that the end had at last come, broke out once again into praises; but Orde went straight on and jovially dished up the fourth introduction. Then:

"I've given my soul to the South Down grass"

he sang at the top of his voice.

Hoffman got up suddenly and went over to the window and, until the terrible verse was over, stood there gazing out down the narrow street at the odd actor people who stood in friendly groups all over the asphalt just outside Cust's Agency. But he, Michael Hoffman, was lying on the shoulder of a great grassy hill, and the blue Weald rolled away for ever from his feet. The sky was full of larks and the sheep browsed all about him, and the south wind, sweet with thyme, brought a tang of the sea to his nose.

He, too, had once given his soul to the South Down grass. And to what had he given it now? Or had he a soul any longer to give? Was it not really safe in some "fernry hill"? Would he ever make enough money to go and dig it up again? he wondered.

Most profitless speculation. But Hoffman was grossly handicapped with folly of the kind.

At the end of the verse a waiter came in with a tray, and this stupid Hoffman seized upon the excuse which yet another lager afforded him to postpone for a while the remarks which were expected from him. Having quaffed as deeply as his allowance of beer would permit, he put down his glass empty and turned to Orde, who remained

at the piano, wiping his moustache free of the whiskey and soda which Ray had hastened to bring to him from the table.

"First rate," said Hoffman, loathing himself.

"You think so?" asked Orde, not at all surprised. "I rather like it myself. There's a sort of go about it. I like this, for instance, this end bit," and he sang more of his pitiful tune.

"Oh Firle and Ditchling and sails at sea,
I reckon you'll keep my soul for me."

There, that last line's what I mean:

"I reckon you'll keep my soul for me."

Hoffman flung his cigar into the grate. "Damn it!" he said harshly. "It's a bit too tough for me. I oughtn't to have taken it on." The foolish fellow derived a certain angry pleasure from his own cleverness in wrapping up his insult so that nobody but himself should understand it. He got up.

"I must push along," he said.

"Oh, skittles," cried Ray, who, quite sincerely, had hoped that Hoffman might make a good thing out of Orde. "Sit down, boy. Why, he's not *begun* yet. Get him a gentler weed, Ordie, and give us some of your things out of the little Bijou show."

"Yes, don't go, please," said Orde, getting off his chair and going over to Hoffman. "I want your advice on one or two points. And let me get you another cigar, won't you?"

"No," said Hoffman. "And as for your song, I don't know what I can suggest. It's—it's—" He bit off the word "ghastly" from the end of the sentence and swallowed it.

"That's just your kindness," said Orde, assuming that a compliment had been intended. "I know jolly well that it's nothing of the kind. And, of course, I hope you don't think I'd trespass on your time and brains without being ready to make you a proper return, Mr. Hoffman. I'm talking business, you understand. Here's a melody that I think good and that I think I can sell. But it's no use my pretending that it's in shape to lay before a publisher. And I haven't the necessary technical knowledge to—"

"What do you usually pay?" Hoffman asked suddenly. Business was business. Money was waiting to be picked up. He wasn't going to be such a fool as to refuse to bend his back for it. If the song had been about anything but Sussex he'd never have hesitated. Hadn't he come into this room with that very idea in his head? Wasn't it Linda's birthday? Wasn't she out of a job? Wasn't she down on her luck? Wasn't there going to be a pretty penny to pay this evening, with the dinner and the play and the supper that she must have? Who the devil was he, anyhow, to balk at one other job of a kind that he was very thoroughly broken to? He wanted half a guinea. Why in blazes shouldn't he make it?

"What do you offer?" he asked.

Orde had not replied to his first question. He was wondering why the fellow had got so short with him all of a sudden. A seedy, poor devil like him, too. He ought to be dashed glad of the chance that had come his way. And Orde resented the suggestion that he habitually employed experts to fit his music together. He did so, certainly, but that had nothing to do with it. Orde was accustomed to greater deference from musicians.

"Oh," he said, "of course if you don't care——"

"Who the deuce said I didn't care?" snapped Hoffman. "Here!" and he jumped up. "Let me show you something." He dropped into the chair by the piano, and without more ado began to play Orde's tune in a fashion of his own.

III

Orde listened in amazement. He was just enough of a musician to know that something very remarkable was being done with his melody. It was the same, yet it was not the

same. Nobody could say that it was a different tune, yet Orde himself could hardly recognise it. What Hoffman did I cannot tell you, because I am much more ignorant of music than Mr. Orde himself. Whether it was the lilt that he changed, or whether he took liberties with the actual notes of the melody, or whether the difference was due to the always miraculous effect which cunning harmonisation can work upon the most commonplace air, is of no importance, because this particular version of Orde's song is not in existence, and nobody will ever know what was done that day on the piano of The Tumblers public house. It is enough if I say that Hoffman's performance caused Orde very definitely to resolve that such a ghost would be cheap at almost any price—if he could get him. He determined to be very civil to Hoffman. As for Ray, quite unaware that anything worthy of his notice was happening, he sat in his chair with his feet on the table, smoking his big, banded cigar and warming himself in the glow of his own self-approval because he had done dear old Mikky a turn. He could see that Orde was impressed. He sat too still and listened too carefully to Mikky's thumping for anything else to be possible. This might be half a quid in Mikky's pocket, perhaps more—lots more. Good business! He needed all he could rope in, poor old son. And this might be only the beginning of much greater things for Mikky. And even if nothing much came of it, Mikky would have an ear to bite after this. One good turn deserves another, dash it all! . . .

Suddenly Hoffman began to sing the words of the song. He had a harsh but true voice, and he gave it out with considerable emotion. He had got his accompaniment to his liking now.

“ I'm just in love with all these three,
The Weald and the Marsh and the Down countrie.”

To him alone a great air seemed to blow through the room, a wind that drove the high cumulus northwards into Kent; and far away through a gap in the green hills he saw a great level and a little old town and, beyond, the dark blue water where white sails lay over to the wind.

The accompaniment changed to a slow movement.

Orde's cheap tune was a funeral march as Hoffman sang the verse which begins :

“ I've buried my heart in a ferny hill.”

Orde pulled his chair closer. He would never have thought of that. He appreciated that.

With the third verse, the marsh verse, Hoffman returned to his first accompaniment. As he ended Ray, bored, broke out into sudden praises. Hoffman turned on him furiously : “ Damn you, Ray,” he cried ; “ can't you hold your jaw ? ” He held up his left hand commandingly and let his right just fall to the treble keys. Then, in the bass, there came a suggestion, pianissimo, of the funeral march in the second verse. His voice became almost a whisper :

“ I've given my soul to the South Down grass,
And sheep bells tinkled where you pass ;
Oh Firle an' Ditchling an' sails at sea,
I reckon you'll keep my soul for me.”

The accompaniment died away in the funeral march. Then he hit the piano twice, anyhow, with all his fingers and all his force, and got up.

“ That was fine,” said Orde heartily.

“ Enormous,” said Ray. “ I told you he could do things on the piano, Ordie.”

“ It was just a bit of blasted mountebanking,” said Hoffman. He pulled out a packet of Virginian cigarettes and lit one feverishly. “ It's just a trick, that kind of muck. Anyone could do it—who cared to. You can have if for a guinea, Orde.”

On further consideration he had come to the conclusion that his torture was worth more than ten and sixpence. And Orde was manifestly eager.

“ Done,” said Orde, and pulled out the money. “ When can I have it—to-morrow ? ”

“ No, you can't,” said Hoffman, pocketing the coins without a word of thanks. “ I'm busy to-night. The day after.”

“ All right,” said Orde.

“ I don't see how you're going to sell it,” said Hoffman. “ They're not anybody's words to use. How d'you know he'll let you publish 'em with your setting ? ”

"I don't care if he won't. I'll fake another lyric on the same lines. I'll make it Kent instead of Sussex—or Dorset. Dorset's pretty fashionable, with Hardy and all. It's only a matter of changing the names of the places and burying my soul instead of my heart. It can be done all right, don't you worry."

Hoffman looked at him for a second or two in silence.

"I should put it in the Potteries," he said. "They're fashionable, too. Arnold Bennett—and so forth."

"I want it just as you played it, you know," said Orde, without considering this suggestion. "I liked that funeral march. That was neat, very."

"Oh, devilish neat," said Hoffman, with a nasty laugh. "Neat is exactly the word. What's your address, noble patron?"

Orde gave him a card, after scribbling on it.

"Bring it yourself," he said, "like a dear man. And there's my telephone number. I expect you and I can do a good deal together if you like. I've lots of tunes in my head, you know. I wish to heaven I'd learnt harmony."

"So do I," said Hoffman, and with that he left them.

"Rum old merchant, Mikky is," said Ray. "No manners, but one of the best."

"I don't like him," said Orde, "but he's clever."

"Oh, he's damned clever, of course," said Ray as he put on his hat.

CHAPTER II

THOUGH Hoffman reached the Shakespeare statue in Leicester Square ten minutes ahead of his time, he found Linda waiting for him. He saw her as soon as he turned into the garden, and the tired droop of her body on the bench caused him to swear aloud. Though she was early, it was clear that no wonderful thing had happened. He went straight up to her and thrust a big bunch of violets under her nose. "Smell that," he said.

A smile struggled out upon her face as she gave him a hand. "Oh, nice!" she said. "I can't scold you, but I ought. I'm too glad of them." She clutched the bunch and put her face into it.

"Many happy—" he began, but she broke in.

"No, don't," she said. "Not to-day. I don't want to remember that this has been a birthday."

"Poor old thing," he said, and patted her shoulder.

"Yes," she said, "that's what's the matter. I look old—at twenty-three. Why, one of the men I saw laughed at me, and said he'd taken particular trouble to mention in his advertisement that he wanted *young* girls for his horrible little restaurant. That finished me, and I came here. Oh, I've been seeing London to-day, Michael! I've tried eight places, and I've spent one and fourpence in fares. And I'm not wanted anywhere. And my boot's burst, and I'm so tired of it all I could scream."

She lay back on the bench and looked up at him with tragic eyes.

He tried to tell her that it would be all right, that her luck was bound to turn, or some such foolish lie. But he

couldn't get the words out. Instead, he went on patting her shoulder. Many of the people in the garden thought that they looked extremely comical. It is so very droll to see a long-haired, shabby fellow standing in a public garden leaning over a plain, tired girl, patting her shoulder in perfect silence as she gazes up into his face. It shows such an extraordinary ignorance of the conventions. It is just the sort of preposterous conduct that one looks for in the long-haired. One would not do that sort of thing oneself. So one smiles.

"If I told you the address of that man," she said, "wouldn't you go and knock him about for me?"

"If it would do you any good I would. But it wouldn't."

"I know that," she said, "and I'm not going to tell. But I like to think of it. He had a fat white face, Michael. I've been imagining your first going right into the middle of it—smack!"

"Don't!" he said. "It's no use. We're not going to spoil the beast's fat white face for him. It wouldn't help us much to go before a beak for assault and battery."

"I don't know," said Linda. "It would be a blow-up. I need some kind of a blow-up. I'm pretty desperate, Michael."

"Oh no, you're not," he told her. "There's always me."

She frowned. "Yes," she cried, "that's it. There's always you. And there oughtn't to be. Don't you see I can't go on living on you for ever. I've borrowed and borrowed."

"Oh, dry up, Linda," he said roughly. "What's the good of going over all that again? Of course you've borrowed. What else could you do? And, hang it! what does it amount to, anyway? A few pounds. Do you think I can't afford it? Do you imagine I'm heroically starving myself to death for your sake?"

"No," she said, smiling weakly, "I don't think that. But there are those uncles. I ought to apply to them. I know I ought. But I go on borrowing from you. I oughtn't. I mustn't. There's pride—"

"Oh, pride be hanged! I thought we were friends. Do you think I wouldn't borrow from you if it was the other way on?"

"I know you wouldn't."

"I would," he cried.

"No."

"Confound it, Linda," he shouted, "if I say I would—"

"I don't care what you say!" she retorted hotly; and even as she spoke the absurdity of what they were doing overwhelmed her, and she broke out into rather tearful laughter. "What fools we are!" she said. "What stupid fools we are!"

For a moment he stared at her, surprised. Then he, too, laughed.

"That's better," he said. "Now suppose, instead of wrangling about what I would or wouldn't do, you come and have some grub. What *you've* got to do is to believe that your birthday's only just beginning. We're going to have a good time. And you're not to object to any extravagance to-night. I'm rich. I made a guinea to-day. Look at it!"

He showed her Orde's sovereign and shilling. "A new customer; pays a guinea a time. A guinea, by Jove! He wallows in money, and he's as full of rotten melodies as a barrel-organ. He wants people to believe that he's an artist, and he's bought me to do the trick for him. I'm going to cast all care to the winds to-night, and so are you, Linda. Do you hear? This is my lucky day."

"I'm glad," she said. "Who's the man?"

"I dunno. Orle—Horne—some name like that. Where's his confounded card? Oh! Orde. Bertram Orde. That's it, is it? What the deuce does it matter what his name is? It's his money we want. And I've got some of it already. It's Umberto's for us to-night. None of your Soho mysteries at eighteen-pence the dozen courses, with ptomaine poisoning for dessert. Up you get, or must I carry you?"

Because she knew that he was quite equal to bearing her to dinner through the crowded streets, and because she was even more hungry than she was tired, Linda got up. He put a hand through her arm, and they left the garden together.

Almost at once they were in Umberto's restaurant.

They and the waiters had the place entirely to themselves, for nobody but hungry people care to dine at half-past five. Nevertheless, they sought out the most retired corner of the room, in obedience to that prehistoric instinct which prompts the public eater to go where, in case of attack, he can be sure of having a wall behind him.

Michael waved the card away. He knew what he wanted. "Fried soles, a chateaubriand, a rum omelette and a fiasco of Chianti," he said. The waiter departed, thinking of his customer with respect. It is one of the minor trials of a waiter's life to be compelled many times a day to recommend enthusiastically to a client half the items on his bill of fare, and then, after ten minutes' discussion, to receive an order for croûte au pot and mutton cutlets.

Linda said, "I am not to protest?"

"No," said Michael. "You are to eat these olives."

"No," she said, "I'm going to make myself beautiful," and she left him.

When she came back he was scribbling on an envelope. "Here," he said, "is the toast list. Do you approve?"

She read :

" Miss Linda Brook.
Mr. Bertram Orde."

"We can let our fellow subjects take care of their Majesties' healths to-night," he said. "Their Majesties will do quite well without our good wishes, just as we shall get along quite nicely without theirs. You are the only person that really matters to-night. I've put Orde in because his health is so important that we must neglect nothing that may give it a lift."

"Is his song very bad?"

"I've doctored much worse cases. It's just a pretty little tune. But the words! Good Lord, Linda, what do you suppose he's chosen to set?"

"Well, what?"

"*'I'm just in love with——'*"

"Oh dear, oh dear—not that!"

"Just that. I wanted to kick him all over The Tumblers. He sang it like a music-hall serio wooing the gallery to join in."

"The brute!" said Linda. "Do you remember the evening you brought Puck to me at the flat and read out that song? You were mad to set it yourself that night. Why didn't you ever do it?"

"I could never please myself. Besides, I should never have got the thing taken. *I* can't pay Pagenbauer to make me famous."

"But he can't use those words, can he?"

"He's quite fit to doctor them, though. He threatened to. Oh, he's a very dreadful little man. But here's the good red wine we're going to drink his health in."

The Chianti and the soles appeared together. Michael surveyed the fishes with an eye of warm approval. "No," he said to the waiter, "you shall do none of your fancy carving upon them. We want to eat them all, bones and all, waiter. Lay them before us, put that bottle by my elbow and leave us alone."

"Michael," said Linda, "don't do it."

"What?"

"Don't help this man Orde to set those words."

"Oh," he said with a laugh, as he hacked two slices from the long roll at his elbow. "That's worrying you, is it? Don't let it. I'm used to the idea now. I didn't fancy it at first myself; but what's the odds? The man'd only get someone else to do it. It can't hurt Sussex, and Sussex is anybody's property. Besides, we're eating his guinea at this moment. Don't be sentimental, Linda; that's a luxury of the rich. Eat, my child; eat and praise Heaven for inventing the amateur, the blessed amateur, to feed us withal. Suppose we were all real artists. Golly! what a thin time we'd have. Don't let your fish get cold. That's a much worse crime than harmonising another Johnny's tune. And you shall have no drink till that sole's gone. I'll bet you've eaten nothing but a bun all day."

Linda attacked her sole.

CHAPTER III

I

THIS man Michael Hoffman and this girl Linda Brook came from the same little town of Lewes. His father and hers had been partners in a moderate way of business as makers of musical instruments. Old Brook the senior partner had married late in life, and died suddenly when Linda was four years old, leaving enough money behind him to keep his widow and the baby in decent comfort. He had been a thrifty, conservative old man, vexatious to his partner, who dreamed of large developments and could never persuade Brook to attempt them. Louis Hoffman was an energetic foreign person with a remarkable talent for music and a boundless belief in himself. How old Brook ever came to take him into partnership is a mystery which it is too late to solve now. But while it is certain that Hoffman knew all that was to be known about trombones and cornets, it is also certain that old Brook was perfectly able to keep his partner's ambition in check. So long as old Brook remained alive all went well. The mistake old Brook made was to die. At any rate, if he had to die he should have taken care that his widow had no control over the money that he left. But old Brook, like many other old men, thought he was going to live and not die, and he postponed and postponed that unpleasant business of altering a will until it was put quite out of his power to perform. He had always meant to give his wife a co-trustee. To do him justice, old Brook's intentions had been excellent. Hoffman had very little difficulty in persuading Mrs. Brook to let him have her ten thousand pounds. Hoffman, in spite of his

name, was a Frenchman, and he had a beautiful gift of language. He could persuade anybody into anything so long as he was not tied down to facts and figures. Had it been possible to dispense with these considerations he would, no doubt, have persuaded the authorities at Carey Street, some eighteen years later, that he was perfectly solvent. Facts and figures, however, meant very little to Mrs. Brook, and against the optimism and verbiage of Hoffman she could do nothing at all. Her ten thousand pounds were swallowed up in the business ; for eighteen years she drew and spent, praising Heaven, her six per cent., and then she found that she and Linda were ruined. This discovery killed her. Linda, at that time a member of Newnham College—she had been indulged by her mother in a desire to be an educated woman—Linda, I say, was left alone, without a degree, and burdened with a passionate resentment against Fate. This is a thing which everybody who suffers from it should get rid of as quickly as possible, because it is no good to anyone ; but Linda never succeeded in doing this. She was a girl with a grudge.

I have said she was left alone. This was not quite the case. There were some relatives on both sides, a family of her father's cousins at Brighton, and an uncle or two, brothers of her mother. None of these people were at any pains to disguise the dismay with which they regarded Linda's situation ; but it was clear to her that they were troubled entirely on their own account. I do not believe they would have actually shut their doors on her, but Linda didn't give them the opportunity. She liked none of them well enough to think of living at the expense of any. With much fear at her heart she spoke big, brave words about her confidence in being able to support herself, declined a well-meant but very half-hearted offer of a few weeks' lodging while she "looked about her," and so disappeared from the ken of her relatives (enormously to their relief), who spoke of her as a plucky girl and hoped that she would do well. A pity, they said, she was not more amiable ; but they augured favourably of her prospects from a certain hardness which they detected in her. A girl, they said, who meant so very decidedly to fight her own battle could not afford to be one of the soft kind. "Poor Linda ! "

they said, and dismissed her from their minds quite comfortably.

Linda, fearing the extortion of landladies, took a very small, cheap, unfurnished flat a little way east of King's Cross, furnished it more or less, and began to hunt a living.

Of course she had no idea of what she proposed to do. Vaguely, teaching was in her mind. There were scholastic agents. She entrusted her name to several of these. They took her fees and did no more. She answered some of the advertisements of people who wanted secretaries. Then she took lessons in shorthand and typewriting. In her spare time she went about reminding the scholastic agents of her existence. While this was happening she lived anxiously on the tiny capital which she had managed to save from the month's cyclone of disaster, of which her mother's death was the black nucleus. The money ran out of the bank like water from a leaky tub, for Linda knew no more about economy than had her pretty, foolish mother.

When the term at the commercial college came to an end she did not dare to risk another set of fees. She felt that she had paid altogether too many fees. She could live on what she had for a few months, and it put her in a panic to think of cutting that period down by a day. Already she knew that even six months was not too liberal an allowance of time in which to "look about her."

She was at this with it when she met Michael Hoffman in the street. Michael was, like herself, on the rocks or thereabouts. His enterprising father had not been content with making a hash of Mrs. Brook and Linda and himself. He had done the thing thoroughly by including his own son. The respectable sum of money which was to have come to Michael from his dead mother had early been swept into the whirlpool of Mr. Hoffman's speculations. Michael at the time of the bankruptcy had been learning to make music in Germany. He had, of course, been obliged to stop; but he had already acquired a means of livelihood, for he had not wasted his time at Leipsic, and he was able to face the future with some confidence.

Few little boys with a taste for evoking music can have had more fortunate surroundings than Michael, because

every kind of instrument had been at his service from his tenderest years. He had been born, one may say, with a silver cornet in his mouth, and when he had gone first to Germany there had been hardly an instrument of the orchestra on which he could not do something.

Arriving in Leipsic with the idea of specialising on the piano, he had quickly discovered that he was not destined to success in this direction. But he did not care at all, because by that time he had decided that he was to write great symphonies and conduct orchestras of European reputation—nothing less. He aimed higher, now, than sitting on a platform, dripping Chopin off his fingers to a crowd of adoring school-girls. Accordingly, he put all his soul henceforward into composition and orchestration and the practice of bandsmanship. He joined a students' orchestra as an oboe. He fought his way into the band of a little music-hall ; he was the last of the fiddles. One summer he took three of his companions to Blankenberghe, and there, leader of the orchestra, thumped a piano day and night for the amusement of the beer-swilling crowd which thronged the space in front of a big café. And he had other "seasons," in Swiss hotels, in Italian bathing resorts, on a Baltic pleasure-steamer. Thus he learned his business and widened his knowledge of Europe and the music of Europe. His professors smiled upon these enthusiasms and blessed him, for when he was in Leipsic he worked like a steam engine.

He never worried Mr. Hoffman about his mother's money. It was in the business, he understood, and the business appeared to flourish. Some day he and his father would have a settlement, of course, but for the moment he was interested in music. So long as his remittances came regularly the confiding young man was content to stay in Leipsic and work. He spent a month or so each year at Lewes, and each time he left home more firmly impressed than the last with the stability of his father's fortunes. Old Hoffman used to tell him about it after dinner, over expensive port and cigars, for which he never would pay.

The news found Michael in Tyrol ; it was then a month old. This summer he had taken out no band—he had had

enough of all that for a while. He proposed a great work for the autumn, a Tone Poem I believe, and he wanted a thorough rest before attacking it. So through five sweet weeks he had been idling among the mountains alone, lost to his world by reason of his aversion from letter-writing. When he made holiday the writing of even a postcard was impossible to the idle dog. Finally he came into the town which he had given to his Leipsic landlady as a probable address, and at the post-office received a bundle of aged telegrams and letters which drove out his idleness with whips.

Two days later he was demanding Linda of her cousins at Brighton, to be told that she had gone away—to London, it was understood—and that nobody knew her address. The two uncles could help him no better. A few advertisements—which he could ill afford at the time—yielded no result whatever. Just then he had no money to spend on detectives; the man was fighting for his life and his father's, remember. He abandoned the search till his circumstances should improve. The uncles and cousins had spoken optimistically about Linda; they were convinced to a relative that she would be all right; should she ever be in want she would, no doubt, communicate with them. Mr. Hoffman, they thought, could make his mind easy about Linda. (Had they not done so?) And, yes, if they should ever hear from her, Mr. Hoffman should be told at once. Further than this Michael for the time could do nothing.

At twenty-six, then, Michael found himself cast suddenly upon his own resources, but by no means prostrated. Now was the time to practise his trade in earnest. But not in Germany. He could not live in Leipsic on the favourable opinion of his professors. Teaching he would have to do until something better should come his way, and he abhorred the very thought of teaching. But he comprehended that Germany was no country in which to set up as a grudging music-master; in England he might be tolerated. So for half a year before he met Linda he had been supporting himself and his father by the sheer slavery which is the lot of the un-famous musician. The elder Hoffman was, however, failing fast. The five or six years during which

he had stared bankruptcy closer and closer in the face while going about his ordinary avocations with a brave appearance, had made him ill fitted to rise up from under the stroke when it at last came. His conversations with those very unimpressionable officials in Carey Street had broken his self-confidence absolutely, once and for all, without hope of revival; and for a person of Mr. Hoffman's sanguine temperament self-confidence is the breath of life. For long he had accustomed his body to delicate fare: he found himself reduced to the simplest rations. He had known and patronised everybody in Lewes: he went about London like a hunted man. The shadow of his ungranted discharge killed the sunlight for him. In a word, he had no desire to live, and he was dying. Michael did his best for the poor man, but he knew that he was wasting his time. Old Hoffman would be better dead; happier in that condition.

The merciful release came a few months after the chance meeting of Michael and Linda. Mr. Hoffman, I think, need no longer concern us.

II

The encounter of these two children of misfortune took place one afternoon in Oxford Street—street of encounters. Michael was hurrying from the office of a publisher, who employed him on certain hack-work, to a lesson in West Kensington. Linda was mooning about looking in at the drapers' windows. It was one of the days when, despairing altogether, she gave up the search for work and carried her grudge about the best streets of London, nourishing it with the spectacle of the well-to-do and the pretty things which, she was certain, were for ever denied to her. She

was in the worst possible frame of mind to meet the son of the man who had robbed her of her money.

She heard her name called eagerly, "Linda! Linda!" and looked round to find Michael at her side. She had never seen him like this. His clothes hung on his big frame in folds. His once comely cheeks were hollow, and his pleasant eyes were sunken deplorably. She had known this man all her life as an easy-going, comfortable creature, careless enough of his dress, but never neglectful where his food and drink were concerned. Year by year, at his returns to Lewes, she had seen Germany fattening him and filling him out, and she had still supposed him—when she had thought about him—to be portly and prosperous-looking. It had never occurred to her to imagine Michael thus. For a moment the shock produced by the change in him made her forget certain matters which troubled their relations.

She became aware that he was holding out his hand. The discovery brought her to herself. She ignored the hand and, turning away, walked off in the first direction that presented itself. She felt sure that she had behaved very properly. For a few steps this assurance kept her head up. Then she knew that she was going to cry. Dimly aware of the multitude among which she moved, she put all her will to the task of restraining this most unseasonable emotion; but her will was not what it had been. Recent experiences had taken a good deal of the stiffening out of Linda. It was, however, impossible to burst out sobbing on the crowded pavement of Oxford Street. She darted up Berners Street, comparatively a solitude, fumbling for her handkerchief. People stared after her and went about their business. She was quite unable to realise that the whole world was not standing still to watch her make an exhibition of herself. The publicity even of Berners Street became insupportable. She felt, dreadfully, upon her the eyes of two lads who were loading a van outside a shop. A doorway gaped by her side. She ran into its friendly obscurity, dabbing at her eyes, past two glass doors and so to the end of the passage. Here against a stout door, which barred her path, she leaned and sobbed and sobbed.

"That's right," said Michael, who had followed, "get it off your chest, Linda. I'm here, you know. You can't cold-shoulder me that way."

She turned on him furiously. "How dare you!" she cried. "Let me alone. You've done me quite enough harm."

"Oh!" he said soothingly. "That's all rot, you know. It really is, Linda. I never did you any harm. I couldn't."

Anger at him possessed her. Why couldn't he see the impossibility of their friendship continuing? Why couldn't he accept what she had done and go away? Surely he must understand that their friendship was ended. He must see that. She sought for some dignified statement of her position, some convincing justification of the injustice which she knew, in her inmost heart, she was doing. So earnestly did she seek that she stopped crying altogether.

"You're that man's son——" she began.

"Yes," he said, "unfortunately. But I don't see what that's got to do with it."

"You don't? You *don't*, eh?"

"Not I," said Hoffman. "No more do you, Linda. What has it, anyhow?"

"It's everything."

"Well, for instance?"

She stamped her foot at him. "Oh, go away, can't you?" she cried. "I hate you. I hate anything that reminds me of him. How can I help it?"

"Well," he said, "it's pretty natural. But I don't see why I've got to lose a friend because my father's a fool and a rogue. He's done quite badly enough by me as it is."

"How dare you talk of your father like that?" she cried. "Have you no shame, Michael?"

"You see," he said, "how illogical you are. *You* can say what you please about him. Why shouldn't I?"

"You're his son. That makes a difference."

"I don't think so."

"But it does. It must."

"Well, what?"

"Oh," she cried, "I won't argue with you! Let me go!"

"No," he said. "No."

"Please, Michael."

"No, I say."

"Very well," she said calmly. "I am going to ring this bell, and when they come to the door I'm going to ask them to let me in because you are annoying me." She laid her thumb on an electric knob beside the door.

"Do it," he said.

For reply she burst into a storm of tears and tried to rush past him. He put an arm round her.

"Linda," he said, "don't be a fool. Don't you want a pal?"

"Not you," she sobbed. "Not you." But she ceased to struggle.

"Yes," he said. "Me."

"It's not right," she spluttered, mopping her eyes with a free hand.

"Oh, tosh, Linda! Cut it out. We've been pals all our lives, haven't we?"

"Y-yes."

"Very *well*, then," he said, letting her go. "What's a rascally father more or less to come between a pair of friends? And he's let us both in. Why not call that an extra bond? My mother left me some money. Where is it?"

"I didn't know that," she said, considering him. "But you might have written to me, Michael. That hurt. You never sent me a line."

"Good God!" he burst out. "Has it never occurred to you that you've hidden yourself? How do you suppose I could write to you? I've advertised, and I've had a man hunting you for months now. What more could I do?"

Her mouth opened. "Oh," she cried, "I never thought of that! Oh, Michael!" she said, and blushed hotly.

He ignored the injustice she had done him. "Come," he said, and held out his hand again. "I don't know, of course, but I think you're up against it. If you'd anything to do now, I don't see why you'd be mouching round here at this time of the day. And, Linda, *if* you're up against it, this isn't the moment to turn your back on a pal who's up against it too. It's no fun fighting London alone."

An excessive need of a friend awoke within Linda. And this was surely a friend. He had advertised for her ; he had done his best ; she had been a fool to doubt him.

"Come and have a cup of tea," he said ; and Linda surrendered. She put her hand within his arm and expelled a great deal of her trouble in one large contented sigh.

"That's right," he said, patting the hand. "Stick your hat straight in this glass door."

III

It was determined between them (though they never said a word about it) that the name of Hoffman's father should be left out of their conversation. They were both too glad that their old comradeship was renewed to run any risks with it. Linda made no inquiries ; Michael offered no information. For them, Mr. Hoffman did not exist. It is true that a month or so later Michael met her one evening with the words, "He's dead," and Linda knew that Mr. Hoffman was gone. Neither of them had pretended any sorrow. "Ah !" she said. Amidst so much and no more lamentation Mr. Hoffman passed away from a world of disappointment. The circumstance is only noteworthy because it improved the state of Michael's finances, and made it more easy for him to spend his evenings with Linda instead of listening to the incoherent ravings against his luck of a very sick speculator. Mr. Hoffman had no longer to be nursed. From this time Michael and Linda saw very much of one another.

That cup of tea and the long talk that went with it put new life into the girl. Michael was in London, and this meant for her just the difference between terror and mere anxiety. So long as Michael was available, disappointments

were simply disappointments, not knock-down blows. When the situations for which she applied were found to be filled, her heart no longer sank into bottomless depths of despair. She could meet Michael somewhere and tell him about it. She could grumble to another, not shake herself to pieces with rage and fear, alone all night in her little flat. Her search for employment was not listless now. The people who saw her about the places they had to offer no longer hastened to get rid of her because of the look in her eyes. The girl had a backbone again. She came into rooms cheerfully, and she left them with a smile. Michael was in London.

This change for the better resulted, within the week, in her getting a job. It was not a princely one, but it was a job.

Dressed in a sort of fancy chef's costume she sat in a shop window not far from the Elephant and Castle and peeled potatoes, sliced carrots, and cored apples with a patent vegetable knife, accompanying these proceedings with a certain amount of broad pantomime expressive of the virtues of the tool and designed to bring purchasers into the shop. There also lay before her an ordinary table-knife, and this, from time to time, she was expected to use upon her material, while she adopted a grimace of loathing mingled with derision. A small, fascinated crowd, perpetually changing, was always in front of that shop, for Linda was a free show. Large placards which surrounded her invited the public to "Step inside," to seize "The Chance of a Lifetime," and informed them that "Sixpence buys it." But whether the letters of those placards were not big enough, or Linda's relish in her work was not sufficiently convincing, or, perhaps, because the populace had learnt caution from experience (though this seems incredible), the patent peeler did not "go" in Newington, and after three weeks the shop was once more vacant and Linda was once more at liberty.

When the end of her peeler came, so far as Newington was concerned, she could not feel sorry. It takes a girl who has lived comfortably all her days a long time to realise that work, however distasteful, is better than unemployment. In her heart Linda welcomed her freedom and,

putting all thoughts of the future away from her, went back to her little room and slept the clock round. She woke to the knowledge that she had no more potatoes to peel, and that there would be no money coming in at the end of the next week.

But Michael was in London.

IV

As for Michael, it was very little he could do to help her. He was fighting London at this time for his life and for that of his very unworthy father, and he had nothing much beyond sympathy and advice to offer. Linda still had a little money left. She could pay her rent and feed herself for some time to come. She had plenty of clothes, out of fashion, perhaps, but wearable. Her affairs were not really as desperate as they sometimes seemed to her. It was the march of the days towards that time—was it inevitable?—when she would have nothing at all, and would have to begin to sell, which was the worst they both had to endure. Michael raged at his impotence. He knew nobody that could be of any use to Linda. A publisher or two, a pupil here and there, some theatrical people—this was the extent of his London acquaintance. Of course the stage suggested itself to them. Linda made valiant efforts to get in anywhere, but she had nothing to recommend her. She was not a pretty girl, and she could not sing in tune. Her figure would have been better if she had taken the hockey at Newnham more seriously and cared less about her class in history. Frankly, her shoulders were round and her chest was flat. The theatrical agents inwardly marvelled why she supposed they could be of any use to her; the few managers she saw told her that they

would let her know in a few days if they had anything to offer her. She never heard from them. And the women she met in these offices made her soul shrink with the scraps she caught of their half-whispered conversations ; the men angered her by their impudent quizzing stares. This funereal little figure that crept along Maiden Lane and Bracegirdle Street invited the wondering notice of the boys and girls of the theatre. Soon she could endure no more of it, and, following the routine established, betook her to Chelsea and St. John's Wood in search of artists who should pay her to pose for them. But all art being, in one way or another, a search for beauty, she fared no better among the painters than among the theatrical people. Both wanted straight backs and swelling bosoms in their employées. Linda was not well born. Her feet and hands were worth nothing to her in those studios. Her face might have attracted a painter who happened to be looking for something quaint to surround with blue china and old oak, or to put on a mermaid's body ; but either she never found such a painter, or he had already engaged one of her competitors. She grew accustomed to failure. That look which had hurt her chances in the first days of her life in town returned to her eyes. The men who opened their doors to her ring read in her face clearly that she didn't expect to be employed. Her expression worried several of them for whole minutes after they had shut the door on it.

If it had not been for Michael she must certainly have written to one of her uncles, but the fact that Michael was in London kept her from that dreaded humiliation, and a respectable relative from a dismal surprise. Somehow Michael's neighbourhood gave her courage to go on.

This period of Linda's life makes uncheerful reading. We need not labour it. What is material to this story can be told in a very few words, and that is the best way to tell it. Because she could get nothing to do, the time came when she had no more money. A morning dawned when she was unable to exchange eight shillings and sixpence at the office of her flat against a receipt for a week's rent in advance. This having never happened before, the excuse she furnished was accepted, but the agent's voice, as he

told her that he would wait till the morrow, made her nearly desperate.

At dinner on that Monday night Michael forced his first loan upon her.

V

Night had come and had found her in the dust. She was tired out with a long day's search for work, without a gleam of hope in it, and to-morrow she was to be put out of her flat. She had one-and-tenpence left.

She crawled up the five flights of stairs and let herself into the dusk of her flat. Her intention was to dine on tea without milk, and bread without butter. She put the kettle on the gas-ring mechanically, and began to drag off her hat by the light the small blaze afforded her. Suddenly a fierce need of something more solid than tea and bread assailed her, and she drove the pin back, jumped up with extraordinary vigour, put out the gas and left the place. One good meal she *would* have. Let to-morrow take care of itself. She ran down the stairs and hastened across the street to the little Fiesoli restaurant where she was accustomed to dine, and to which Michael came on his free evenings. One penny she left behind, hidden under the tea-caddie on the chimney-piece. The precaution was perhaps unnecessary, but this was a very important penny. It stood for the stamp which was to carry a letter away that night. She could not even surrender without that penny.

She knew that Michael would not be in the Fiesoli. He was engaged that evening to accompany the singers at a banquet. Had she expected to see him I doubt if she would have gone: the necessity of confessing another failure must have seemed too dreadful.

While she eyed the bill of fare gluttonously, stifling the reproaches of conscience, Michael, in evening dress, came in and took his place beside her. His banquet had fallen through. The veteran soldier whose eightieth birthday was to have been celebrated had disappointed everybody by dying of apoplexy that afternoon. But Michael had found his guinea waiting for him at the Trocadero, so it didn't matter. On the contrary, it was a very fortunate circumstance, because it enabled him to come speedily to spend an agreeable instead of a detestable evening.

Because of his escape he was in a prodigious good humour, and in spite (or because) of her day's failure she was suddenly so glad to see him that all her troubles fled away from her, and it was not till their dinner was over that the brutes began to come back, and Michael began to notice it. Then she realised that this was her last meal with Michael in this restaurant. The good spirits which she had almost succeeded in making real abruptly gave place to an overwhelming despondency. And when the bill had been paid (she always insisted on dining on the Dutch Treat principle) and she found herself with one halfpenny and the penny which was under the tea-caddie, and no more, it was only by exercising the greatest care that she succeeded in talking at all.

For some time Michael had known that things were very low with Linda. Now he began quietly to persecute her into telling him the truth. When it was out he reached across the table for her bag and took her purse out of it. She supposed that he wished to satisfy himself that there was really no more than a halfpenny in it.

He put the guinea he had earned into the purse and handed it back to her. "Please," he said. "Please, Linda."

There were still a few people lingering at the tables. Their presence helped Michael. Linda could hardly protest; argument was out of the question with all those ears agog and all those eyes busy. She resolved to have the matter out with him as soon as they should be alone, as soon as they should be in the flat. But she doubted her ability to persuade him. She knew the look his face wore.

In the flat Michael simply refused to discuss the matter.

That first battle was a long one, but it went definitely in his favour. About later loans (which were more easy for her to accept) he condescended to argue, but invariably he had his way. In her heart Linda wished him to have it. Only the fact of these loans is important. The circumstances surrounding them need not detain us.

Let us get back to Umberto's restaurant.

CHAPTER IV

I

THEY dined and then went to take up their places in the pit queue outside the Broadway Theatre. Although they had a good hour to wait they found many people there before them, for with "The Archduke" Foscari had scored yet another huge success. As they both hated talking, jammed among a crowd of strangers, Michael bought Linda a magazine to amuse herself with, and himself set to work with a pencil and a note-book, ruled for music, earning Orde's guinea. At once he was lost to all sense of his surroundings. Linda had the wall to lean against, but he stood square on his two feet, scribbling, with the note-book held up near his face, and his lips moving now and then while he smoked one acrid Virginian cigarette after another. As he came near the end of each he fished its successor from a pocket, lit the thing impatiently from the glowing stump, and went on working. These movements seemed quite mechanical.

A girl with a piccolo came and pierced all their ears, while a one-legged acrobat performed a clog dance with the help of a crutch. Then a fellow arrived with a zither-like instrument, out of which he hammered a wheezing waltz or two. A guitarist accompanied two songs from a woman with a wailing soprano. Michael worked on through it all. He was aware neither of their efforts nor of their tin begging-cups. Boys tried to sell chocolate to him. Blind men led, presumably, by their daughters mumbled their petitions down the queue. Michael worked on. Only when a little Jew struck up the intermezzo from "Cavalleria

Rusticana" did he seem to notice that anybody was trying to entertain him. And then, "Confound the boy!" he said, "he's got a gift," and abandoned his task, smoking with a frown, until the little Jew ended and came along in turn with his cup for payment. But Michael gave nothing to talent, as he had given nothing to incompetence. By the time the boy arrived at his elbow he was busy again.

Linda found more to interest her in these unfortunates than in her magazine. She leant against the wall looking at them, almost enviously. They, at least, had something to put upon the market; they, at least, kept themselves going. She began to make calculations based on the number of pennies which seemed to find their way into the cups, and the number of pit queues which these people might be supposed to visit in the course of an evening. By adding the matinée days to their working week and the money they might take outside public-houses to what they earned at the pits, she strove to arrive at some rough estimate of their incomes. The one-legged man had clearly done best; he had an Irish tongue which drew pennies in an amazing way. The blind people met almost uniformly with cold shoulders. And there had been a man with a contorted arm. From him people had seemed to turn away in disgust. She felt glad that the real mendicants got less than the artists, who did honest work, within their limitations, for what they got. That was right. But it was not comforting. If she had not had a good dinner inside her she doubted if she would have been able to be glad. If Michael, for instance, had not been in London, would she herself be anything at this moment but a mendicant? What had she to offer to the public for its money? And, when all was said and done, what was she now but a mendicant, living on Michael's charity? It must not go on. It must not. It must *not*. For the thousandth time she resolved to write that night to one of her uncles, for the thousandth time she set about comparing those unsympathetic men and balancing her chances with each. And again she regretted her confident proposal to earn her own living.

If she had only given in at the beginning and saved herself this useless struggle and the crowning humiliation of failure!

And yet—she had the satisfaction of having tried. She had that.

Sounds came from behind the pit door, and all the queue pressed forward hopefully an inch or two. Michael stuffed his note-book into his pocket and looked round at his companion, showing his white teeth in a friendly smile.

“Tired?” he asked.

She supposed she must look it, but she felt that he need not have rubbed it in. “No!” she replied, tartly enough.

“Good!” he said as the doors opened.

They talked very little while they were in the theatre. Linda wanted to forget to-night that she had ever been unhappy. She gave her whole attention to the nonsense that was going on in front of her. She absorbed herself in estimating the points of the show girls' gowns, and when the funny men were on the stage she laughed at everything they said. During the interval Michael got an ice for her, and it had been such a long time since she had tasted one that she could think of nothing else while she ate it. Michael didn't make any effort to chat; they were too crowded for comfortable, easy talking. People who are accustomed to say exactly what they think exactly how they like, find solitude the best aid to conversation.

After the play he called a cab—she protesting vehemently—and took her home to her Adelaide Buildings. He went up to the flat with her and let her make the cocoa—which he loathed—while he, in the sitting-room, lay on the bed, which was a sofa by day, and smoked cigarettes and stared at the ceiling through the haze that he created about him. When she brought her cocoa in from the little kitchen he sat up and drank it, vowing that it was excellent cocoa. He understood that Linda would wish to be hospitable in her turn.

They got to talking about the song he had been writing at the pit door, and this led them to Sussex, and, as they often did, they fell into reminiscences of the country they both loved. It was: “Do you remember that walk by the Downs to Ditchling?” or “Do you remember that sunset we saw from Beddingham?” And all the time inarticulate, because too painful for utterance, behind all their talk was the memory of the fine great plans they had made

together as they tramped or lay on those beloved chalk hills, the big things they were both to do. They never spoke of those plans now, though they could never keep their talk long away from the scenes of their formation.

About one o'clock Michael suddenly swung himself to his feet, told her to buck up, gave her hand a squeeze, and was gone, never looking back. She was glad he had made no more of the good-bye, because she had hoped all along that she would be able to let him go without crying, and she had.

She wept disastrously as soon as the door of her tiny hall closed.

II

Michael walked home. He had spent quite enough money on the evening, and unless Orde should give him some more work he was like to go short for a time. He didn't mind that prospect very much. He was accustomed to going short. Besides, Orde was going to give him more work, lots more. But though he was quite confident of this, he refused to entertain the idea of a cab. Michael could be self-indulgent—he was too much of an artist to practise rigid and consistent economy—but that night he was proof against all the solicitations of belated hansom. He was too fresh from Linda's company. He looked further ahead, just then, for a use for his money than the end of the half-hour which separated him from his own room. As sure as eggs were eggs Linda's rent would be wanted on Monday, and he was not wholly certain of being able to provide it. If Orde came out valuable, or if a certain publisher should prove touchable—and Michael thought he would—for an advance, there would be plenty.

But if both these resources failed him he would have to go without a watch for a while. And he didn't want to go without a watch, a useful possession for a music-master.

It would be a nice thing if he stood himself a cab and as a consequence Linda wrote to an uncle. Michael was resolved to keep the girl in town if it could be done. He loved her, you see, and he didn't know if she cared anything for him that was worth consideration. For Linda's friendship he had no longer any desire ; he no longer counted it of any value to him. He wanted her. And this was his courtship.

As he walked along the dead streets he cudgelled his brains yet again to imagine something which the girl might be able to do for a living. If she could only get a job—something permanent, something with more than a living wage, something that would let her pay him back and put her on her legs again, something that would make it possible to ask her to marry him ! He cursed the necessity that had been laid upon him of making her take that money. Till she had disburdened herself of that debt he could never ask anything of her. But what would you have ? Either he lent her the rent and the price of a week's meals, or she caved in and went away from him. He knew those uncles of hers. Each was the man to do his duty by a niece. (And how he would do it !) Linda wasn't destitute. She could always and at any time go to an uncle. But—but—but— And meanwhile every week made the only sensible solution of the problem more and more difficult of proposal.

If he had asked her when she came to the end of her money ! If he had done it then ! But even then the thing was impossible. Just when a girl finds herself with no resources, that is not the time to ask her in marriage. Obviously !

He ought to have done it while she had some coin. But then he didn't want to marry her. Wasn't it very largely her helplessness and despair that had won him ? Or had he wanted to marry her, after all, before she had no money ? Had he not always wanted it ? Perhaps. But he had not known it certainly then or at any previous time. Now he did ; that he *was* sure about.

A girl like Linda had no business to be proud or try to be independent. She wasn't woman enough for it. She ought to acknowledge her inability to fight her own battle and let him do it for her. God forbid she should go to an uncle! There was really no need to call in anybody of that kind. Here was he, Michael, earning enough for the two of them, and on every possible ground owing her the fullest reparation he could make; and here was one obvious solution to the difficulty in which he found himself. But it would never do to let her imagine that he wanted to marry her in order to make amends for his father's misdeeds. Why, he had never so much as suggested this as a reason for her letting him lend her money. That would have been altogether the wrong way to go to work with Linda. As a friend he had had quite enough trouble to achieve his purpose; as a man who was bound in honour to see that she didn't want, he wouldn't have stood a chance of success. The trouble with Linda was that she was proud and insisted on being independent, and couldn't understand that she was quite unfitted to be either.

"Some day," he muttered, "I'll tell her about herself, and there'll be an end of it. Oh!" he cried, "why the devil can't I find her a job? If she could only pay me back those few confounded pounds she owes me—then I could marry her, poor dear, and she wouldn't have to pretend to be self-supporting any more. But I don't suppose she'd have me," he groaned. "Women are like that. There'd be some infernal subtlety that I've never thought about."

After a time he found that he was in his own street and approaching his door. He let himself into his lodgings and went quietly up to the big bare attic room where he slept and worked. Here he lit the gas and, sitting to the table immediately below the jet, began to work rapidly from the notes he had made outside the theatre.

The dawn came and he worked on by its light when it had swamped the gas—it was an improvement on the gas—only shifting his body slightly from between his paper and the window. Soon afterwards he finished his task. Then he threw off his clothes, fell into bed, and was almost instantly asleep.

III

He woke about half-past eight o'clock, and, lest he should oversleep himself if he took more rest—he was fit to lie snoring till the afternoon—he got up, made himself some tea, ate a slice of bread, and played his music over once on the piano to see if it was readable for anybody but himself. He found that he had been careful enough.

Half the *Daily Telegraph* lay within the room below the door. He pulled the thing through and, spreading it open at the advertisement pages, began his morning hunt. It was characteristic of Michael that he indulged himself with a paper instead of going to a free library. His interest in what went on around him was very small, and he seldom read much beyond the advertisements and the theatrical news ; but he liked, if he wished, to cut out a slip now and then and paste it in an album he kept. The free library reader cannot do this. It is quite likely that the use of a free library had never occurred to Michael, for some little extravagance or other often survives a heavy financial blow until it is perceived or pointed out.

His first lesson was at eleven, and he had nothing to do until that hour. He was almost sorry now that he had sat up to work. He had reserved this morning and the coming night for dealing with Orde's song, and now the thing was done and he was idle. But last night he had felt like it, and to feel like it, with Michael, was to do it. At any rate, he was a day to the good with Orde. He would take the song round that afternoon. There was a telephone number on Orde's card, wasn't there ? There was. He would telephone to Orde to be in at four o'clock. He must keep Orde on the run now he had got hold of him. Gentlemanly musicians who paid a guinea a time were worth looking after carefully.

And he had a project, not very resolute, which concerned itself with Orde very closely. Orde rolled in money, did he ? He paid for the production of his own plays, did he ?

That was an uncommon enough find, a man who did that. Why shouldn't something come of it? A lyric writer, was he? and his dialogue was good enough for the blue pencil! That was as good dialogue as anybody could desire. If he, Michael, could do as well he would be quite content; but that was just what he couldn't do. As for anything like a lyric, it was beyond his utmost capacity to achieve it. A librettist with money, that was what he wanted; that was what half the musicians in London wanted. Decidedly Orde must be cultivated; and the sooner he began to sow a seed or two the better. What a fool he had been to be so short with the fellow yesterday! It was that confounded Three Part Song that upset him. To-day he would be as sweet as sugar.

While he thought these things his eye travelled always down the advertisement columns of his newspaper. Suddenly with an exclamation he bent closer over the table. He had found the following in the "Wants" column:

" Reader and amanuensis required, preferably lady; educated accent and pleasant voice essential; to read aloud to partially blind man. Long hours but liberal pay. Apply 108, Pontefract Terrace, Bayswater."

He had hardly reached the end of this announcement before the old blue dressing-gown and his pyjamas were on the floor, and he was pulling clothes all over himself. Catching up the newspaper, he ran out of the room, down the stairs, out of the house, and round three corners into the main road of his district. Here a hansom, sent apparently at that early hour by Providence, received him and, stimulated by a promise of great reward, galloped off with him in the direction of Linda's flat. Leaning forward on the doors, Michael studied the advertisement and cursed the slowness of the horse alternately.

It was nearly half-past nine. How many people had called at 108 Pontefract Terrace by this time? Remembering the age-long toilet of woman he swore at the horse. Could he get her there much before eleven? He doubted it. It would make him very late for his lesson; but that was nothing. By eleven Pontefract Terrace would be a mob of people waiting to interview a partially blind

man. Yet she must make the attempt. He swore she should.

The pace of his hansom became altogether intolerable, and when an early taxi-cab was discovered coming towards them, he began to wave his arms to it wildly and to shout to his driver to pull up. The transfer was effected rapidly. Michael seemed to pass from one vehicle to the other at a single bound, and the motor cab was vanishing round a corner before the driver of the hansom had recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to pocket the full fare which he had been commissioned to earn.

Michael felt comparatively happy as soon as the taxi-cab had got way on itself. He was travelling as quickly as it was possible for him to travel. The strong hum of the machinery was delicious and comforting after the intolerable, deliberate clock-clock-clock of the old cab horse's hooves. As the streets fled behind him the number of persons waiting at that moment outside 108 Pontefract Terrace began to diminish, and by the time he reached Adelaide Buildings he had come to take quite a rosy view of Linda's chances. None the less he ran all the way up the five flights of stairs. Arrived at her door he cast himself against it, furiously hammering, and calling her name. As he mounted, the possibility of her already having gone out had occurred to him.

Joyfully he heard her move within. A shadow appeared on the thick green glass of the door, and her voice spoke :

"What on earth is the matter? Who is it?"

"It's me," he cried. "Michael."

"Good gracious!" she said. "Whatever do you want?"

"Let me in," he cried.

"I can't," she said, "I've got nothing on."

"Oh, damn!" said Michael. "I knew it." He tore the page of advertisements from his paper and put a pencil line round the only item of importance. He thrust the sheet through the letter box. "Here!" he called. "Read what I've marked. Then get into some clothes as fast as you know how and come down. I've got a cab. Remember it's a taxi, and every minute you spend in arranging your hair is going to cost me a shilling."

He was careless of the accuracy of this statement. He was much more concerned to make her hurry. With his last words he turned and clattered down the stairs to show her that he was gone, and that discussion was impossible until she should be ready to meet the gaze of the street.

His manœuvre was a masterly one. In ten minutes Linda came rushing out of the flats—and tidy. Without allowing her any speech at all, he thrust her into the cab, followed her in, and they were off.

Her words and his during the drive need not concern us. I suppose she protested against this outlay in cab fare upon a most unlikely speculation, and I dare say he silenced her in some masterful way or other. I have no doubt he invoked the magic name of Orde, firmly established now as an excuse for any extravagance. It is only important to observe that when they reached Pontefract Terrace, that quiet, tree-bordered road was empty of all life.

"The job's earned," Michael thought with a mental groan; and to Linda he said: "No one's called yet. Hurrah!"

As they stopped beside the gate of the house they sought, the front door opened and a young woman appeared. She passed them as they got out of the cab, and Michael took comfort from the despairing look in her eyes. The job was not earned—unless someone was in there now, earning it.

He urged Linda through the garden gate. A spectacled young man had appeared in the road walking purposefully towards them. He carried a black bag. No doubt he had brought some books with which he was familiar, to read from them. He looked a careful young man, not likely to leave anything to chance.

"I'll wait," said Michael; and he watched her mount the steps, ring and enter the house. Then he paid the cab, reducing his worldly possessions to a quite unimportant number of shillings. As the cab drove off the spectacled young man arrived, passed through the gate and was admitted into the house of that partially blind man whom he aspired to entertain by reading aloud.

IV

Michael waited, doing sentry-go in an ever-increasing beat in front of the house, and smoking always. He had no particular reason to be optimistic about this attempt, but he was. The morning was a bright one ; the little, low, whitewashed house with its green shutters looked friendly ; he had met a taxi-cab at half-past nine in the morning, and Linda had been three-quarters dressed —so she had explained her speed and her statement that she had had nothing on—when he reached Adelaide Buildings. All these things looked well. Michael, though he affected to despise superstition, had been no more successful than most of us in getting rid of that legacy from the past. In spite of himself he was hopeful.

Somebody, after a few weak, preliminary flourishes, began to tune a piano near by. Michael fretted instantly under the annoyance. The remorseless reiteration of each note, struck again and again until the tuning ear was satisfied, seemed at this moment so peculiarly unnecessary to his well-being. If this fellow had been doing his work competently it would have been easier to bear ; but he wasn't. Michael cursed him for a fool, and black clouds gathered in his sky.

Half an hour passed and still Linda did not come out. He conceived a crowded condition in the hall of the house. Perhaps the partially-blind man was not up yet. Then he remembered the girl who had come out, the girl who had so obviously failed, and he knew that the trial was being held. Was Linda seeing the man now ? Or had her turn not come ? To his amazement no more applicants arrived. He had grown so used to hearing Linda say that "the job was already filled," that he had come to imagine thousands converging instantly upon every address that appeared in the "Wants" column of the *Telegraph*.

It was now half-past ten, and he must be going soon if he meant to give his lesson, and he could not possibly

afford to neglect a pupil to-day. He would give her five more minutes.

These passed, and he gave her one more ; this, and he gave her another. He wished very much that he could know before he left. He felt that he had done something to deserve a little indulgence in this respect. His only comfort lay in the fact that the piano-tuning had ceased.

Suddenly the spectacled young man came out of the house and Michael's heart bounded against his ribs. He had been in the article of quitting the spot. As the young man came towards him down the path Michael tried to read his face. But the spectacled young man had a face from which nothing was to be read. It was a smug, prim face flanked by small chop whiskers, and there was a gingery moustache on it. The cheeks were pink and plump. Michael wondered a little at their plumpness. The seeker after jobs of the kind that was going in No. 108 Pontefract Terrace does not commonly look so well-fed as did this young man.

He came deliberately forwards, carrying his black bag, his arm straight along his side. His feet neither hastened from misfortune nor lagged against the necessity of further effort. A stoical young man this, who could so calmly leave the scene of a last defeat. Yet not altogether a stoic. A flower in the border attracted his notice. He paused, took it between his fingers and examined it, lowered his snub nose to it, inhaled its fragrance. Then he came on again. Michael admired him and loathed him for his self-control. If it had been he, Michael, there would have been no pausing to consider blooms in a flower-bed.

At length the rejected candidate came to the gate, stepped delicately through it. He closed it carefully after him, then, turning to go, met, through his spectacles, Michael's eyes curiously regarding him. He flushed under the gaze of this big, lantern-jawed ruffian with the long hair and the disreputable hat.

Michael said : "No luck ? "

"I beg your pardon," said the other.

"I beg yours," said Michael. "The fact is, a young friend of mine is after the place, and I want to know things. I'm afraid you've not got it, but I should be devilish obliged

if you'd tell me if there are many people in there. It's very important to me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the young man.

"You don't, eh?" cried Michael. "May I ask you, then, what you've been doing in there?"

"No," said the other with dignity. "You may not. Your question is an impertinence."

Michael moved to intercept the fellow. "I dare say it is," he said savagely, "but I repeat it." He was not in a mood to bear criticism.

The young man looked quickly up and down Pontefract Terrace. There was no help in sight. The policeman whom he paid to prevent this kind of annoyance was not available.

"Since you insist upon it," he said, "I have been tuning the piano."

Michael burst out laughing. "So you have," he said. "Damn you!" he added cheerfully, pulling out his watch.

The young man looked profoundly offended, as was perhaps natural. He turned his back on this odious person and began to walk away. Michael caught him by the arm.

"That's all right, old man," he said, in his most friendly voice. "But you're no use to me, you see. Sorry if I was rude. However, I mustn't wait here any longer, you know." He strode away.

"Dear me," said the young man with the whiskers and the spectacles and the black bag, looking after Michael over his shoulder. "Dear me!"

CHAPTER V

I

HOFFMAN had luck with the telephone when, at last, he got to it after his eleven o'clock lesson. Orde was at the other end of the wire. In a few words they arranged a meeting for that afternoon in Orde's flat. What Hoffman did during the interval doesn't matter.

He found Orde in princely premises. The flat was in one of those expensive structures which look northwards over Kensington Gardens from the neighbourhood of the Albert Hall. It was high up, far removed from the dust and noise of the road, and it commanded a really beautiful view of Bayswater across the tree-tops. A manservant let him in, the hall furniture and ornaments were of the best, and all that he saw in the big room in which he waited for the owner of the place fully confirmed his belief that he had encountered an exceptional opportunity. He tried the piano, and priced it at not less than two hundred guineas. A tall cabinet of plain cedar-wood by the wall suggested an extravagant taste in tobacco. The pictures were choice ; Brangwyn was represented in water colour, and there were several of Whistler's lithographs. The book-cases declared a fondness for opulent bindings. Fresh cut flowers were everywhere in good pieces of Japanese porcelain. Hoffman shook hands with himself in the mirror.

Orde appeared, faultlessly attired. "My dear man," he said, "I'm sorry I've kept you waiting. What'll you drink ? A cigar, Hoffman ? "

Michael accepted everything that came his way. He was enchanted to find Orde so affable.

"You're a quick worker," said Orde. "And you're clever. You'll go far, Hoffman."

"Well, I'm quick," said the other, "and that's about as good as being clever. If one can bring the goods up to time the quality's apt to be taken for granted. We're all in such a thundering hurry nowadays, and when you're out to make money from music it's better to have it poor, but on paper, than a masterpiece, but in somebody's head. The public must have its music day by day, and if it's your business to feed it you can't afford to let the supply fail, or they'll go elsewhere. That's the only reason, so far as I can see, why three-quarters of the stuff they put out ever gets past the publisher's waste-paper basket and into his printer's hands."

"Precisely," said Orde, who, being himself a writer of very inferior music, had the profoundest contempt for everything of that class which appeared without his name on it.

"Now here," Hoffman went on, sitting to the piano, "is something that's worth while." He played over the Three Part Song. "My only doubt," he said, when he reached the end, "is that the accompaniment's too tough for them. These young ladies want flap-doodle in the accompaniment, or they get tied into knots and there's trouble. But I'd be sorry to simplify it. It's good, Orde."

"I know it," said Orde.

He had been thinking a great deal about Hoffman since their last meeting. If Michael felt that he had met with an opportunity, so did Orde. Orde was certain that talent of the Hoffman quality was not to be picked up very often, even at a guinea a time.

"You try it over presently," said Hoffman, "and see what you think of it. You know what the publishers'll take better than I do, I expect. You've published plenty, haven't you?"

"Lord, no!" said Orde. "Only three or four things. They've not gone very great, either."

"Well—anyhow—"

"Yes," said Orde, "I'll consider it and let you know. I expect you could simplify it a bit—eh? without damaging it very seriously."

"Oh, I expect so," said the musician, strumming.

"Good. It's dashed clever, Hoffman. I believe, though, that the air has a good deal to do with its success—eh?"

"Well, rather," said Michael. After all, its melody is an important part of such a composition. Even amber beads require a bit of catgut to make themselves into a necklace.

"Do you do much on your own?" Orde asked.

Hoffman's heart began to beat. Here was the opening—here began the game which he had come to play.

"A certain amount, of course," he said. "It keeps one from cutting one's throat, you know."

"Let's hear some, won't you?"

Orde wanted to keep the man in a good temper, and he knew that there could be no surer way of achieving this result than to ask him to play something of his own. Besides, Orde was curious to hear what this Hoffman could do—curious and eager. Hoffman wasn't the only one of them who had a game on.

"All right," said Hoffman carelessly, "I don't mind." He turned to the piano again and instantly began to play a slow sad air of the barcarolle species. Its nature was so obvious that Orde asked at the end of it, "A barcarolle, that, eh?"

"Yes. Something of that kind."

"Charming," said Orde. "Haunting." He was right. It was a tune calculated to make the heads of a theatre wag.

"Have you any words for it?" Orde asked.

"No."

"I do a bit in that line myself," said the other, lighting a cigarette.

"Do you?" said Hoffman. "Listen to this." He played a stirring march. He played the refrain twice. Orde beat time with hand and foot.

"I say, that's not half bad, too," he said. "I say, you ought to do something with those. You should send them round a bit. I should think Foscari or some other of those musical comedy people would be glad of them."

"I'm sure they would," said Hoffman. "But I want my name to go with this music. It's not everyone I'd play those airs to, I can tell you, Orde."

Orde was flattered. "I suppose," he said, "it is devilish hard to get into the Ring."

"I've never tried," said Hoffman, "I want a Ring of my own. I'll get it some day, too."

He began another air, what is called a "dainty dance." It had no great merits. It was the kind of tune to which the heroine's pretty maid trips about the stage, some time during the first quarter of an hour after the curtain is up, while the less sophisticated stallholders are coming in. But it made Orde enthusiastic.

"Why," he said, "that's positively vocal. I could write a lyric to that?"

"Oh, I expect so," said Hoffman. "Here's something for the Second Act and to send them home with."

He began to play a waltz. Now everybody can invent a waltz. That is why tunes like Michael's, once they become known, force their way into every ball-programme and restaurant music-list for a year at a time, if not for ten. Orde recognised the great waltz—or thought he did. It is hard for any but an expert to hear a musician playing his own unpublished stuff without imagining it to be much better or much worse than it is—which, depends very largely on the hearer's personal feelings towards that musician.

Orde was no expert, but he believed that he knew something about music. He desired for reasons of his own to stand well with Hoffman. Lastly, the waltz was really what they call "a winner." It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Orde hailed it as such.

"A winner, my boy," he said solemnly, holding out a hand. Michael obliged him by shaking it. Orde felt that he had done quite the right thing. "That waltz," he said, "would make the fortune of any play. I'll take my oath about it."

"I wouldn't," said Hoffman. "It wants more than a waltz to make a play go. You've got to dress the pretty ladies in pretty clothes, and you've got to pay some merchant about a hundred a week to be funny. It wants a thundering fine waltz to stand up against a bill for a set of Paris dresses, two years ahead of the fashion, to say nothing of the rest of the most ordinary little ten thousand pound production."

"Oh," said Orde, "it can be done for less than that."

"Yes—it can, of course."

"I mean in an amateur way. You can copyright it for a fiver and then go about to sell. I did a play with a man like that last year. It only cost me a few hundreds; I hope to do something with it still. I wrote the book, but I knew nothing about the stage then. It was pretty crude."

"Of course," said Hoffman, "you've got another in hand?"

"No," said Orde. "The fact is, I haven't been in London much since then—I've been in Switzerland all winter and France since March. I've only just got back here. But, of course, I mean to tackle something else now."

"Any idea?"

"Not at present. But it'll come."

"Good luck to it," said Hoffman, and he began to play again, this time what was evidently a ballad, as they call the songs that give the baritone and the leading lady their chances to bring down the house. He sang the air, la-laing it. Even with the disadvantage of Hoffman's ugly voice, the song impressed Orde as a good one. Then he broke into a quick measure—a tarantella, one would say. Orde listened enviously. If the fellow could rattle off music of this kind, what the deuce was he doing ghost-work for, and giving piano lessons? Orde was tempted to steal some of these airs, but his better nature asserted itself. This Hoffman could be exploited surely in a more paying way than that.

"That's all very Italian," he said, as Hoffman filled up another whiskey from the siphon. "That and the bar-carolle. Quite Neapolitan."

"They're meant to be," said Hoffman, drinking.

"Have you studied in Italy, then?"

"No. But I've been there. I used to travel a good deal at one time. Italy's a good *locale*. It's been done, of course, but never properly since 'The Gondoliers.' That dance would want some real tarantella dancers, I expect. They'd knock London sky-high. And you can get them. You can get anything if you pay for it. That's the trouble, paying. If I had even five thousand pounds——"

"Well," said Orde eagerly, "what would you do with them?"

"Oh, I expect I'd go and lose them," said Hoffman with a laugh, "same as all the other mugs. By gad! What a view you get up here!" he exclaimed, going to the window.

"Look here," said Orde, following him, "is all that stuff you've been playing part of something you're working at? You spoke of that waltz 'for the Second Act,' you know."

"Oh, well, they're just a few tunes. P'raps I'll fit 'em up into something some day."

"You've not written them down, then?"

"My dear man!" said Michael.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, what in the devil should I be wasting my time that way for? Do you think I don't get enough music-writing as it is? If you were a publisher's hack, Orde, you'd not think pen-work such a sweet job. Lord! how I loathe it! No, I keep all my pretty little airs in my head till they're actually wanted, thanks. They'd look no prettier on paper; not to me, at any rate, and I'm the only person who's concerned. And they'll keep all right. And it don't matter a straw if they stay in my head for ever—to anybody but me. They're not much good to me just now, anyway."

"Why not?" Orde persisted.

"Why? Because I don't know anybody in the business except that chap Ray and a few more of his kidney. That play I was to conduct did me no good. The syndicate was rotten, and the cast they got was rotten, and their play was rotten to begin with. I only took it on as a desperate chance to get to know somebody, just as they only took me on because no other musical director was available—or would touch them with the end of a barge pole. Why, Billy Burgess warned me against them—the blessed agent they were employing to get a musical man for them—warned me that I mightn't see my money. But I didn't care. I wanted to get *in*. And, damme, I will some day, and then we'll see about 'The Conspiracy at Capri.'"

"What's that?"

"Oh, hell!" said Michael, admirably vexed. "Now,

don't you go and give that away, old man. That's the name of this play I've written—at least, I've written a lot of it, you know."

"Words and all?" cried Orde, profoundly disappointed.

"Words? No. Music. I've got the plot all worked out, but I can't write a line of dialogue; and as for lyrics—well, a man like yourself, who can do those things, can have no idea of the kind of fool a man like me can feel when he comes to playing about with words. I can't understand it. One'd think any damn fool could write good enough dialogue for a musical play, but he can't. That's how, Orde."

They remained silent, Michael wondering if Orde would bite, Orde weighing other considerations. Each entirely for his own purposes was anxious to make use of the other; neither was yet sufficiently certain of his antagonist's capacity to make any definite advance towards an amalgamation of interests. Neither wished to help the other in the least. But they were so situated that neither could do anything for himself without doing something for the other. Orde wanted Michael's music and Michael's idea. Michael wanted Orde's money and Orde's pen for his libretto. And because money is by far the most important thing among these four essentials to the production of a musical play, Michael was at an immeasurable disadvantage. But Michael was the better man of the two.

"Well," he said, getting up, "I must toddle. Try that stuff over and let me know if it'll do."

"Don't go," said Orde. "I'm just going to have tea." He rang the bell. "I want to hear that waltz again," by which he meant, "I want a little time to think."

II

Michael played the waltz again and yet again. He put all his soul into the playing of it. He felt as if, with this

music, he was trying to charm five thousand pounds out of Orde's pocket. He played with extraordinary seduction. From the tail of his eye he could see Orde wriggling in his chair. From the waltz he passed at once into other tunes, all the little songs and dances that had been born within him during the past year, to dwell in his busy brain with their elder-sister idea, the idea of the Capri play. Tea came in, Orde poured it out, placed Michael's cup on the piano and then prowled in the room, sipping tea and munching hot toast, listening, and now and then exclaiming. Michael played on for his life, for his love, for Linda. He let his tea grow cold. With every exclamation that came from the other man, with every entreaty to continue, that five thousand pounds seemed to rise nearer to the mouth of the pocket which enclosed it.

Orde was sorry by this time that he had allowed himself to be so enthusiastic. He felt that he had given himself away in his desire to keep Hoffman in a good temper. He ought to have been more cautious. But since he had begun on that line it would be absurd to abandon it now. The thing to do now was to stimulate this Hoffman to play all he had to show. Orde smiled to think how easy this was. The vanity of these musical merchants ! But the stuff was fine. Fine ! It had—or he could swear it had—*tremendous* qualities in it. (The most tremendous music, it should be noted, is that which makes the greatest number of people pay to hear it.)

Yes, it had been a false step, that enthusiasm. What he ought to have done, of course, was to pour cold water steadily from the word go. That is the procedure best calculated to bring anybody who has anything to sell into a frame of mind entirely in accordance with the wishes of a purchaser. That, however, was no longer possible. It remained to make the most of his enthusiasm, to whoop it up, to flatter, to call upon Heaven to witness that never had there been music like this music. If Hoffman's "idea" was anything like his music, a little flattery would be cheap payment for it. And without this idea the music itself would very likely be much less effective.

Orde wanted to write the words for Hoffman's play. He fancied himself greatly on lyrics, particularly love

lyrics. He believed that he had a Gilbertian touch in his sentimental verses. He had, but so has everybody who has written since Gilbert, and has bent his energies upon the imitation of that incomparable man.

Orde wanted to write those words. His experience of the previous autumn had sharpened his appetite for dabbling in stage work. To be the author of a successful musical play is to achieve at a bound the fame which Orde coveted. It is to be within measurable distance of caricaturisation in *Vanity Fair*. It is (almost) to be mentioned by a pet name in *The Referee*. It is to sup at the Savoy in glorious company. It is to be pointed out in Coventry Street. It is to sell as a picture postcard. It is to "have the managers after one." It is to become a member of the Savage Club. It is to go into theatres "on one's face." It is to have the waiters at Simpson's vie with one another for the privilege of serving one. It is all sorts of delightful things.

Orde wanted to write those words.

But five thousand pounds is a lot of money. Orde had more cash than was at all good for him, but he loved it all. A West End production ! It wanted to be approached cautiously, the thought of a West End production did. Many times in the past year he had approached it, always cautiously. A failure would be worse than inaction. And he knew so little about the business. If he should spend his money on a frost ! The thought gave him unpleasant sensations.

But the Ring ? It was unbreakable for a man like himself. He might go on standing meals to all the profession for twenty years and never get inside the Ring. Orde hated hard work, and he knew that only the very fortunate, the very talented, or the very hard-working ever got into the Ring. A Gilbertian touch is not enough to carry a young gentleman with no stage connection into the Ring, however much money he may have. His only alternative is management.

Five thousand pounds ! Would even that be enough to make an unknown man's play go ? One wanted something to carry on with. A very ordinary West End production could lick up ten thousand pounds and ask for more.

Fifteen thousand was nearer the mark. What good would five thousand do? And yet, these try-ons sometimes came off. You could get an unlucky theatre cheap. Look at the Aylesbury. Everybody said it was an unlucky theatre; no one would touch it; it stood shut year after year. And then they started with "The Barbadians"! Two years, think you, and still running. A plucky, unlucky theatre that!

The comedian was the really important thing. Get a first-class man and half the battle was won . . .

Or wasn't that idea exploded now? Weren't they beginning to think more of the music than of the comedian? . . . These Vienna plays had rather dropped the comedian's importance. . . .

It was the waltz that made a play now . . . And Hoffman had a winner . . .

Anyhow . . .

Thus Orde, to himself, prowling in the room while Michael played for those five thousand pounds which rose towards the mouth and sank towards the bottom of Orde's pocket as Michael's music or Orde's doubts gained the upper hand.

III

Suddenly Michael stopped playing and turned round.

"Ever been at Capri, Orde?" he asked.

"No," said Orde.

"The town square of Capri," said Michael, "has been built especially to put a musical play into it. It is a perfect stage. On one side, right, there's an old yellow church with a half-circle of steps leading up to the door. Centre, there's an old yellow clock tower, and funny little shops

and houses with green shutters and iron bars lead all round the side. Left centre, there's an archway, for an entrance, under the houses. Between the church and the tower there's a low wall and a back-cloth of the bay of Naples, Ischia, Vesuvius, and a blue southern sky. You're a thousand feet up. What a set for a dawn effect! My play begins at the dawn, with a policeman asleep on the church steps with a revolutionary manifesto pinned to his hat, and another manifesto on the church door, and others on all the house shutters."

"A bit quiet, isn't it?"

"Well, certainly. The idea is to give them something different from the usual chorus opening with twenty fat girls and twenty fatter men dancing round a maypole, or keeping it up in the front hall of the Hotel Crœsus. People seem to think that unless a musical play begins with a burst of light and laughter it doesn't stand an earthly. They say that you've got to get 'em from the word go. I agree with that, but there's more ways of getting them than one. The crescendo principle might never have been heard of, the way these people begin their plays."

"Yes," said Orde, sitting down. "Go on."

"Here's the Dawn Music." Michael turned to the piano again. "I've not got this opening done, but it begins something this way." As he played, "This," he said, "is all in darkness except for the big stars in the sky, one dim light burning before a shrine on the church, and a lighthouse that comes and goes over on the mainland, and the red top of Vesuvius. Usual twittering bird business, a red bar comes, away over the sea, and then the day begins to arrive." He played on. "Now you can see the stage pretty clear and the sleeping policeman (he's one of the comics) lying on the steps. The electrician plays variations on the reds and yellows, and all goes sweet and low. Birds twitter like blazes. The top of Vesuvius turns from red to smoke; Ischia comes out blue on the sky-line. All the colour of the church and houses wakes up, and with this bar my second bobby strolls on from behind the church. He sings to the sleeping gent. He wants a good voice for it, too." Michael la-laed a brisk air. Then, "He's asking him," he said, letting his hands fall, "if he's had a

comfortable night's rest, and trusting that his vigil has not been disturbed by any infractions of the law—something on that line, getting at the poor dear old peeler once again. It's wicked waste to put anything new into the opening *words* of a musical play ; no one listens to them, anyhow. The other bloke won't wake up. Comic business rousing him. Soon as he's awake, jumps up and grapples with the other. Oh ! I've got all the business here worked out more or less ; but I won't bother you with it. There'll be music for it all. But this is where my opening stops at present. I got hung up for an air for their duet, and I've never come back to this part."

"What happens, though ?" asked Orde.

"Oh, I'm not going to bore you with my rotten old play," said Michael.

"Yes, you are," said Orde earnestly.

"Oh no, dear boy."

"I mean business, Hoffman."

"The devil you do ! How ? "

"I mean I want to go in with you if you'll have me. You want a librettist, and you're afraid to try round with your idea. Well, I'm your man. I like your music. It's first rate. It'll go. Well, if your idea's anything like good enough for your tunes, and if you'll give it me to work on, I'll——" he paused.

"Well ?" said Hoffman, and he lit a cigarette.

"Well, I might back it," said Orde. "If you want a librettist, I want a composer. Why not ? "

"Well," said Michael meditatively, "I don't know. Why not ? I might think of it, Orde. But I don't know what you can do. Have you anything to show ? "

"I'll get my play," said Orde eagerly, "the play little Chalkley and I wrote. You can see it."

He began rummaging in a drawer. Michael, strumming chords, grinned happily to himself.

CHAPTER VI

I

LINDA stated her business to the butler who had opened the door. He invited her to enter, offered her a chair, and, going to the end of the hall, opened a door there. "It's another person," Linda heard him say into the room, "to see about the advertisement, Miss Psyche." A young voice called cheerily, "All sereno, Antonio," and the man went away.

For a minute or two nothing happened. Then the door-bell rang. Linda's heart sank. Another applicant. The butler came and admitted a young man who passed instantly up the staircase and vanished. The butler opened the door upon which Linda's gaze was fastened, and said, "The piano-tuner, Miss Psyche," and again came the reply, "All sereno, Antonio." Once more Linda was left alone.

Upstairs the tuning of the piano began ; was completed. The young man appeared ; descended ; let himself out. Linda began to be angry. Over half an hour she had sat here, and this Miss Psyche had given no sign. What could she be doing ? Not a sound came from behind her door, except now and then a light humming. Did Miss Psyche suppose that people who came in answer to advertisements enjoyed kicking their heels by the half-hour, seated on uncomfortable hall chairs ? Linda indulged in some very bitter reflections concerning the selfishness of the well-to-do. It was abominable. It was heartless. It was—

Suddenly the door at the end of the hall moved and a girl in Turkish dress stood in the opening.

Linda had never encountered a more beautiful creature. She was very small and slight and seemed very young. Her delicate black brows, beneath the low broad forehead, were curved exquisitely above dark blue eyes, fringed with long black lashes. Her colour was rich and red ; so far, her beauty was all bold. Her mouth was a disappointment. It was lovely enough, but it was weak, discontented ; and the rest of the face seemed to call for absolute decision in the mouth. The hair was marvellous, a shining mass of black. It was hair to set low and to heap heavily upon the neck. Unfortunately its owner had chosen to build it up high in an enormous and elaborate arrangement of puffs. Slim in her Eastern jacket and petticoat-trousers, she looked top-heavy, ridiculous, but still triumphantly lovely. On her little feet were slippers of red morocco leather, preposterously high in the heel. Big gold rings—most woefully inappropriate to her style of hair-dressing—were in her ears, and she wore a lot of glittering stones on her fingers. She leaned against the side of the doorway, one hand (it held a cigarette, just lighted) on a hip, the other hanging loosely by her side, its sparkling knuckles to the front. She stared sleepily at Linda through half-closed eyes. Her head was thrown back, stretching her long round throat, and she yawned easily to show her pretty teeth. Most conspicuously an attitude.

"Good-morning," she said through her gape, nodding rather amiably. "Have you used Pears' Soap ?" This foolish and antique bit of rudeness nettled Linda, after her long wait, very nearly into forgetting all about the post she had come to seek. She managed, however, to say nothing.

"Dumb, eh ?" said the girl. "Thought you came to read to my father."

Linda's discretion forsook her. "Yes," she said. "But not to endure your impudence."

The girl laughed. "That's right," she said, "stick up for yourself, do."

"I propose to," said Linda stiffly. "Insolent little toad !" she thought.

"Well, do it, my dear woman," said the other. "No-body else will. What's your name ?"

"I beg your pardon," said Linda, "but what business is it of yours? If it's your father who wants a reader I'd like to see him."

"Yes, yes," said the girl indulgently, coming forward with a lithe, slow step. "But you'll see me first, won't you? I'm sorting 'em out for him. It's quite fun. I might rather like *you*, though. You stick up for yourself. I think you might be amusing. And your voice and accent are all right. You're easily the best that's happened along yet. I'm sorry, now, I kept you waiting, but I was busy painting. Yes, I expect you'll do. I've fired two already this morning, and three's a lucky number. What did you say your name was?"

Linda got up. "Good-morning," she said, and laid her hand on the door.

"Oh," said the girl, "don't run away just as we're getting along so nicely. Don't I tell you you'll do? I like your face. It's quaint. I'd like to draw it."

Linda fumbled with the catch of the door and failed to open the thing.

"See here," said the girl, dismayed, "stop it, won't you? I was only just trying a game on with you. I'm all right, really. Don't get stuffy because I chaffed you. I didn't mean any harm. It's my way. You'll get used to it."

"I don't think so," said Linda as she at last threw the door open.

The girl ran nimbly forward and suddenly plucked the umbrella from Linda's hand. "I've got your umbrella, anyhow," she said with a gay laugh, dancing off. Linda supposed that she was insane.

"Give it to me at once," she said sternly, "or I'll call a policeman."

"Oh, don't do that," said the other. "Come inside again instead. It's far more sensible. Don't I tell you you can have the billet?" She pulled Linda into the house by an arm. Linda allowed herself to be pulled. Once on the doorstep she had realised what she was doing; she was turning her back on a place that was being offered her. The girl in the Turk's dress closed the door on them, and proceeded. "I like you," she said. "You've got some pith in you. Now those others just giggled and blushed

and took everything I gave them. They were no good to me. *I* want somebody who can give as well as take. Look here ! I'm sorry I gave you any sauce. I'll apologise if you like. It was only a test. I can't stand humble people. They are the most infernal bores, I think." She held out a hand. "Shake," she said, smiling in a very friendly way. "I'll promise not to bore you," she concluded.

The creature was so little and so beautiful and so outrageous and so impudent, and altogether so different from anything she had ever seen, and its smile was so friendly, that Linda could not be angry any longer. She laughed and "shook."

"So you're sorting them out?" she said.

"You bet," said the other, "and I don't propose to let anything like poor old Broddy get past me. My father wants a new reader, but *I* want somebody to lunch with when I'm at home. I hate having to talk to the servants when I'm eating. Now come on and be examined. You'll do. You speak very nicely. I suppose you can read aloud all right?"

"I've never done much, but I expect I can do it well enough with a little practice," said Linda, "unless your father wants very difficult books read to him. I don't know German, for instance ; but I can do French, I imagine."

"German," said the girl. "French ! Wait till you're asked, my dear. There's nothing to tax *your* brains in what the father'll give you. Come on and be examined. But it's all right. *I* pass you." She hooked a hand in Linda's arm and led her down some steps and along a passage with glass walls, showing a garden. At the end of this passage was a door against which the girl set her shoulder to burst it open unceremoniously. Beyond was a big square room, lit by a skylight and clothed as to its walls with full book-cases. Linda was dragged inside.

II

Two people were in the room, a man and a woman.

The man—the employer—took her eye first. He lay on a great leather-covered sofa which was drawn up across the fireplace in which, hot though the morning was, a small fire burned. He wore a loose robe of dark green quilted silk, but this was thrown open, and beneath it he was carefully and neatly dressed in clothes of an admirable cut and quality.

He was large and portly. His bald head shone in the light. Over his eyes he wore a great shade of green cardboard, which concealed all his face save the broad end of a big nose, a large, full-lipped mouth and a heavy shaven chin. He lay quite still, his hands in the pockets of his dressing-gown. Over his feet was thrown a light rug of dull green cloth.

The woman was an ample person, dowdy and spectacled. She wore a plain skirt and a blouse of mustard silk. Her hair was untidy and was beginning to turn grey. She sat in a large armchair close to a revolving book-case, and open in front of her on a stand attached to the chair was a book. Evidently old Broddy. She peered at Linda for a moment as the sentence she was reading died away on her lips. Then her eyes fell to the book again.

“ Broddy,” said the girl in the Turk’s dress, “ now you can go and make your painter-man happy at last. Ain’t you pleased ? ”

“ Psyche,” cried the man on the couch peevishly, “ what do you mean by breaking in on us like this ? How many times must I tell you that I am not to be disturbed when I am at work ! ”

“ Easy all, father,” she said. “ Be grateful, can’t you ? Haven’t I brought you a new reader ? ”

He sat up and pushed the shade off his face, disclosing tinted spectacles beneath high, arched eyebrows.

“ Ah ! ” he said, staring at Linda, “ somebody has

called, eh ? You have called," he addressed Linda, "about——" He tailed off. "Hum !" he said. "H'm ! Let me see. She'd better read something, hadn't she ? Let us hear her read—eh, Miss Brodrib ? Then I can tell. I trust your voice is a pleasant one and your accent cultivated," he informed Linda.

"I hope so," she said. "But that, of course, is for you to say, not me."

"A decidedly pleasant voice, I think," he said. "Eh, Miss Brodrib ? "

"Decidedly," said Miss Brodrib.

"And her accent most tolerable, I think ? "

"Entirely so," said Miss Brodrib.

Linda was deeply gratified.

"If her reading, eh ? is at all up to the mark she should do. Do you not agree, Miss Brodrib ? "

Miss Brodrib assented.

"Then let her read." He lowered the shade over his eyes and lay back on the sofa, his hands once more in the pockets of the dressing-gown.

"There's a book by your hand," said Miss Brodrib. "Please read something to Mr. Whittaker."

Linda picked up the book from the table beside which she stood. It was "The Wrecker." She opened it and began to search for a place at which to begin. Somehow the choice of this place seemed very important to her. She rejected one well-known passage after another. The Parisian part she felt might remind her too forcibly of her own situation. This was not the moment in which to have that called to her mind. She hesitated over the description of the Hebdomadary Picnics, and rejected it as being too humorous. Something without any very pronounced character would be better, if she could find it in that book. As she turned over the pages a panic began to lay hold of her. Her power of selection was becoming paralysed by the expectant silence which dwelt in the room. She felt Psyche's big eyes on her. The stillness of the man oppressed her. Miss Brodrib's spectacles glittered in the firelight and distracted her attention. At all costs she must begin somewhere.

The man cleared his throat, and she jumped where she sat.

"Well?" he said. "Well?"

She opened the book at random and attacked the first passage that met her eye. It happened to be the narration of the massacre on the *Flying Scud*. Soon she realised that almost anywhere else she would have made a better choice. She was not accustomed to reading aloud, and the discovery that she was speaking these dreadful things suddenly began to overwhelm her. Her voice broke in her excitement.

"Tut!" said the man impatiently. "This will never do. Never!"

"Oh yes, it will," said Psyche. "Let her try again. You said you liked her voice and accent. You know you did."

"I know I did," he said, "and I do. Yes, you're right, Psyche. Let her read something else."

"Yes," said Miss Brodrib, "her voice is pleasing and her accent is refined. Will you read something else, please?" she said to Linda.

With the inspiration of despair Linda turned to the introduction and read that long passage which describes the entrance into harbour of Dodd's steamer. At the end of it the man interrupted her. "She'll do," he said.

"I should say so," observed Psyche.

"Yes," said Miss Brodrib.

"Yes," said the man on the sofa.

Psyche clapped her hands silently at Linda and gave her an amiable smile. "Good," she said. "Then I'm off." Without more ado she left the room. Evidently she regarded the matter as settled.

"What is your name?" the man asked.

Linda told him.

"You do not read well, Miss Brook," he said. "You must improve. Be more distinct. Take your time at first. Pace will come."

"Yes," said Miss Brodrib. "Pace will come, as Mr. Whittaker says."

"You are evidently educated," said Mr. Whittaker.

"I was at Newnham," she said.

"Degree?"

"No. I had to come away."

"Nothing—ah—nothing *wrong*, I hope?"

"Oh no," she said, "only that I lost all my money."

"Indeed. Very unfortunate."

"Very," said Miss Brodrib.

"Very," said Linda drily. Because she was to get the place these solemn fools only amused her.

"I offer," he said, turning the conversation into a more pleasant channel, "one shilling an hour, which will amount to thirty-three shillings a week; and one shilling and six-pence an hour overtime. Your working day will be one of six hours, except Saturday, when you will have your afternoon. Luncheon will be provided here, and you will have an interval for it and digestion of two hours, from one o'clock to three. Tea also, half an hour. You will be here each morning at ten, and you will leave at 6.30."

"And what about the overtime?" she asked.

"Saturday afternoons from one o'clock and Sundays will be overtime; also Bank Holidays. If you remain with me so long I give ten days' holiday in the year."

"I will do my best to please you, Mr. Whittaker," said Linda.

"Then, Miss Brodrib," he said, "I need detain you no longer."

Miss Brodrib rose obediently. "Very good, Mr. Whittaker," she said.

"What is the time, Miss Brodrib?"

"Three minutes to eleven, Mr. Whittaker."

"We will call it eleven. To-day is Wednesday, so that will be"—he put his hand into his pocket and fished up some loose money—"thirteen shillings I owe you." He picked out a ten shilling bit, a florin, and a shilling, and held them out to his departing reader.

She took the money, thanked him for it, and began to move towards the door, slowly. Halfway she hesitated and turned back. "Good-bye, Mr. Whittaker," she said humbly.

"Good-day, Miss Brodrib."

The frowsy woman blushed, heaved her shoulders in a clumsy little shrug, and went out of the room.

"Miss Brook," said Mr. Whittaker, "remove your hat and, if you will, your jacket. To-morrow and in future

you will do this before you come in. Anthony will show you the cloak-room. And now take the reading-chair and continue. The last words were, 'Surrender, you assassin.'"

Adopting a spirit of passive obedience which had been bequeathed to her by her predecessor, Linda did as she was told and sat down. In front of her, open on the book-holder, she discovered a copy of Mayne Reid's "Headless Horseman." She began to look for the place she had been given, but her faculties were all absorbed in marvelling at this termination, which she had witnessed, of what had been apparently a long and faithfully-observed employment. What kind of a man was this at all? He might at least, she reflected, have shaken hands with the woman. "Good-bye, Mr. Whittaker." "Good-day, Miss Brodrib." This was no kind of way for these two people to part. It was inhuman. And it was clearly to be laid to the man's blame. The Brodrib had looked an honest, ordinary, warm-hearted soul enough. She had evidently felt a wish to be, for once, something more than a machine to her employer. But she had been schooled. She had been soundly schooled. Linda conceived a detestation for Mr. Whittaker.

"Well, Miss Brook? Well?" came from the sofa.

Linda's eyes chanced on the desired words. She began hastily to read. Suddenly she thought of Michael, waiting in the street, and she stopped.

"Well?" he asked. "Well?"

"If I might——"

"Proceed, Miss Brook."

Linda could do no more. Michael must be patient till the evening should come.

She went on with the ninety-seventh chapter of "The Headless Horseman" from the point where Miss Brodrib, on the entrance of Linda and Psyche, had abandoned it. Linda's ignorance of the first ninety-six chapters of that thrilling mystery rendered her task almost infernal, but, reflecting that she was here to earn money and not to be amused, she read on gamely, unravelling the complicated threads of plot for the benefit of Mr. Whittaker alone. Presently, to her prodigious relief, the book came to an end.

She paused.

"Is that the end?" asked her employer.

"Yes," said Linda.

"You will always signify that the end is reached, Miss Brook."

"Very good, Mr. Whittaker."

"I have no time to waste."

"No, Mr. Whittaker."

He let the reproof sink in, and then he said: "We will now undertake 'The Scalp Hunters.' You will find it in the revolving case. What is the time?" She told him five minutes past twelve.

"Ah!" he said. "We can gain a chapter or two. Begin, Miss Brook."

Linda began "The Scalp Hunters" without delay. She was glad that Mr. Whittaker apparently did not read more than one of Captain Mayne Reid's books at a time. If she had been asked to begin "The Scalp Hunters" at, say, the forty-second chapter, she must have done something desperate.

As the clock struck one she was reading the following sentence:

"Who are these gentlemen? I inquired from a person who sat by me, indicating to him the men of whom I have spoken."

Mr. Whittaker held up his hand. "That will do," he said definitely.

"But," cried Linda aghast, "don't you want to know who they were?"

Captain Mayne Reid had worked her up into something like a fever of interest concerning the gentlemen in question who "dressed nearly all alike: in fine black cloth, white linen, satin vests, and diamond pins;" who "wore the whisker full, but smoothly trimmed, while several of them sported moustaches," whose "hair fell curling over their shoulders." She knew—for her eye had travelled on—that "the person who sat by me" replied: "The prairie men." She ached to let Mr. Whittaker into this secret.

"At one," he said, "we stop. I do not encroach upon your time."

Linda felt that she had been guilty of wishing to encroach

upon his. She shut the book obediently, slipping in a piece of paper for a mark, and got up.

Mr. Whittaker pressed a bell which hung from the ceiling.

Until the butler appeared nothing was said. Linda employed the interval in marvelling at this bulky middle-aged gentleman who paid people to read antique boys' books of adventure aloud to him, and shut off the power at the very moment when a question, evidently of an importance vital to the story, was about to be answered. What kind of a taste in letters might these actions declare? And apparently he was quite prepared to wait two hours for knowledge. He could lunch, perhaps take a nap, all ignorant as he was of the identity of those nobly-dressed whiskerados whose proceedings so strongly stimulated the curiosity of Mr. Haller in his St. Louis Hotel.

To his butler Mr. Whittaker said: "Anthony, take Miss Brook and give her into the care of Jane. Then come and mend the fire. Till three, Miss Brook." He waved a hand, dismissing Linda.

She looked back from the door. He lay always quite still, the hands in the pockets of the dressing-gown, the great green shade pulled low over his face, the light shining from his skull, the heavy chin upon his chest.

Linda followed the butler into the hall. The daughter of the house was waiting there in the doorway, out of which she had first appeared.

CHAPTER VII

I

“ O H,” she said, “ here you are, then. Serve lunch like lightning, Anthony. I’m frantic for some food. And now, you, come and titivate.” She took Linda by the arm. “ You want it,” she said, leading on towards the staircase. “ Your hair’s awful. Come upstairs, and I’ll show you my room. You must be dead, you poor thing ! Have you been at it all the time—reading, I mean ? ”

“ Yes,” said Linda.

“ Golly ! ” said the other, “ what a trade ! No wonder Broddy’s such a funny old bag of tricks. Well, *she’s* gone, thank goodness. You’d never believe the selfishness of that woman.” She paused on the staircase and emphasised her statements with her child’s fist, pounded on the banisters. “ Absolutely refused to lunch with me. Said she must give her voice a rest, and insisted on feeding alone. And the father backed her up, positively. Not that I wanted her company ; it isn’t so cheerful as all that. But I must have someone to talk to, and that’s all there is about it. But Broddy didn’t care, selfish old beast ! I wish her painter joy of her. They’ve been engaged since the Ice Age, and now he’s got a few portraits, and they won’t wait any longer. Hence you. The father’s very sick about it and just loathes Broddy for going. Thinks her very ungrateful. And the poor old thing’s quite ashamed of herself for leaving him in the lurch. Quite unhappy about it, she is. Did you ever hear the like of that ? After three years’ slavery. I tried to make her see that she ought to be jolly pleased to be able to score off him at last,

but I couldn't. Do you know, she actually asked me to explain things to him for her, because he wouldn't listen to her. As if he was likely to care anything for the state of Broddy's heart, or her painter's either. And as if the father would listen to me either ! However, if she hadn't come to me I wouldn't have known they were putting in that advertisement, and I couldn't have waylaid *you* ; so I'm obliged to Broddy, for once. I like *you*, and I want you to stay. Come on ; " and she began to drag Linda up the stairs again.

" I say," she went on, " those were awful things, those two that blew in here this morning. You wouldn't believe what they were like. I put them out pretty quick, I tell you. I had to get up three hours too soon, but it was worth it if *you're* as decent as you look. I do loathe lunching alone. I say, this is my room. What do you think of it ? "

The room was large and of a sumptuousness quite remarkable in these days of hygienic bedrooms with their enamelled furniture, cork matting, and free currents of air. Enormous curtains of dark red velvet hung at the three windows, the floor was a kaleidoscope of Oriental rugs, the walls were hung with sombre tapestries, and the bed was a vast four-poster in mahogany with pillars elaborately carved and thick hangings of red brocade. There was a mighty sofa flanked at either end by a deep armchair, all three covered with red velvet. The wardrobe and the dressing-table matched the mahogany bed, and there was a table in a corner of the same rich wood and character.

Many silver things were arranged neatly on the dressing-table—brushes, combs, hand-mirrors, button-hooks—and there were plenty of silver-topped bottles of red cut-glass, and a great silver circular box, open, with a mighty puff in it.

The table in the corner was littered with things ; six-penny magazines, many pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, journals of fashion, a round glass box of Hungarian glass half full of fat chocolates, an oblong one with three cigarettes in it, a white kid glove, a hookah (Heaven save us !), a banjo, a pair of red Turkish slippers, a writing-pad, a copy of *The Referee*, a box of water-colour paints, a case of stationery,

a tall quill dyed scarlet and mounted to hold a steel nib, a Billiken (on his back), some torn music, a brown-paper parcel with a blank label tied to it, a necklace of Venetian beads, a fan, the libretto of "The Arcadians," manicure pads—almost anything you please. A spangly dress trailed over all.

"Don't look at the table," said Psyche, "it's in a mess, I know. But that's me. The girls daren't touch it. I give them the rest of the old room. I hate to have my own things tidy." She curled herself suddenly up in one of the armchairs, snuggling into the yielding cushions, almost lost to sight. "In some ways," she said, "the father's pretty decent to me. He let me furnish this place just as I pleased. All that mahogany cost a lot, I promise you; but he didn't jib an atom. I say, what's your name? I suppose you don't mind telling me now."

"Brook," said Linda.

"Oh, hang surnames! I've no use for them if I like a person."

"Linda, then."

"That's better. Mine's Psyche. I say, don't you like this room?"

"It's very comfortable, I should think," said Linda.

"Comfortable! Well, what do you *suppose*? I *must* be comfortable. That's why I wear these trouserines about the house. And if one can't be comfortable in one's bedroom, it'd be a pity, wouldn't it? You ought to see this room at night in the winter, with a big fire going and all the curtains drawn. It's top hole, and warm as an oven. You can roll about on the sofa with just as little on as you fancy. I love myself against red velvet. I've my own bath-room too, through that door. That's a *bath*, that is. I don't know what it cost the father, but he paid up without a shudder. I say," she cried, sitting erect suddenly while a curious smile came on her lips, "just wash in the bath-room, if you don't mind. It'll save time, and I'm absolutely starving, and"—she jumped out of the chair—"I'll just scratch a note."

As Linda went through the door the creature was already seated at the table, clearing a place right and left with her elbows among her feminine marine-store

The bath-room was all tiled in white, and the bath was a masterpiece of ingenuity. There were about ten different kinds of sprays and douches, to judge by the labelled taps which were fixed in the wall one above the other, like the stops of a grand organ. A conspicuous ornament was "The Bath of Psyche," which hung near the door. One entire end of the room was fitted with a mirror, an odd bit of furniture, Linda thought. Her eyes were a trifle tired, and she bathed them luxuriously.

Suddenly, while she dried her hands, a shrill scream rang in the next room. Linda darted through the door. Psyche stood by the table, dancing excitedly on her toes and wringing her little foolish hands.

"Oh," she shrieked, "I've spilt the ink! I've spilt the ink! Blotting-paper, quick! Where's the blotting-paper?"

On the fine silk cover of the table lay a little penny ink-bottle on its side. Beside it was a small pool of ink.

Linda, scorning the helplessness of her hostess, strode forward, dropping her towel, picked up a sheet of white blotting-paper which lay under the table, and came to the rescue. She felt a considerable superiority to this useless, pampered child who wrung her hands and cried for help like a mad girl, instead of grappling with this very trifling crisis.

"Here," she cried. "Don't get excited. I'll do it."

She advanced a corner of the blotting-paper to the edge of the ink-blot and tried to plunge it in. The ink-blot slipped bodily over the table-cloth. It was a sham ink-blot, excellently contrived in polished vulcanite.

Psyche was screaming with laughter. Doubled up with it, she fell on to the sofa and rolled about there, gasping.

"Sold!" she shrieked. "Sold! Oh dear, oh dear! 'Don't get excited,' she says, 'I'll do it. I'll do it!'" She bit a cushion to restrain her mirth within the bounds of physical endurance. "Oh!" she mumbled, "I ache. It'll be the death of me. Oh! I haven't laughed so much since baby died!"

For a moment Linda was quite cross; she felt that a liberty had been taken with her. Then she too laughed. It was no use being angry with this preposterous little person. A sparrow might as well expect to be blamed for

its impudence. She picked up a cushion from a chair and threw it at Psyche with all her strength. It hit the girl full in the face.

Instantly Psyche was on her feet, her eyes blazing. "How dare you!" she cried. "How dare you! Don't you know I can get you sacked?" Then her face changed again and she laughed once more. "Hang it all!" she said, "I'm sorry I said that, but you rather hurt me, you know. I say, you've got some muscle. It came like a cannon ball."

"Then I'm sorry I hurt you," said Linda, as she went to the dressing-table and took out a pocket-comb from her handbag. "I shan't be a minute now."

"Oh, you'll be hours with that potty little thing. Take my comb."

"No, thank you," said Linda.

"Just as you please," said Psyche, offended again. "If it's not good enough for you, use your own, please do. But for any sake buck up. I want my lunch, if you don't want yours. I say, that ink blot's a bit of a wheeze, isn't it? It's not half bad, eh?" She broke out into further laughter. "I got Eliza with it gorgeously the other day," she went on. "I stuck it on the front of one of the father's shirts while she was checking the laundry-book. She nearly had a fit." The memory of Eliza's distress restored her amiability. "Come on, old slow-coach!" she said.

Linda, more or less tidy, accompanied her hostess down the staircase. At its foot a servant waited for them to descend.

"I say, Eliza," said her mistress, "I've just worked the good old ink blot on Miss Brook. I wish you'd been there. You *would* have laughed."

"I hope not," said Linda.

The maid looked up sharply. She seemed about to say something saucy, but she met Linda's eye and was dumb. Psyche swept on magnificently without waiting for a reply.

II

In the dining-room they found Anthony, erect and dignified, by the sideboard, and a maid whom Linda had not hitherto seen.

"You can clear out, you two," said Psyche. "We'll help ourselves. Put those things on the table." She pointed to a covered dish and a bowl of lobster-salad which lay on the sideboard. "Can you carve a duck?" she asked Linda. "Good. I can't. A jelly's about my limit when it comes to carving; isn't it, Anthony?"

The butler smiled and went about his business. Linda gathered that he was only tolerant of familiarity from his employers.

When they were alone Psyche, helping herself largely to lobster-salad, remarked :

"I hate servants in the room when I've anyone else to talk to, don't you? They give me the creeps, standing there listening to everything and making notes of it to repeat downstairs. Of course, when you're alone it's different."

She was already sprawling over the table, picking little bits of lobster out of her plateful with a fork, and eating them quickly as she spoke. Linda had never seen anybody quite so free from the trammels of dining-table convention.

"I say," Psyche continued, "I do love lobster, don't you? And duck? I didn't leave the food question to Anthony *this* morning. You see, I made up my mind to like you as soon as I saw you. I size people up pretty quick, pretty quick. And I swore you should have lunch with me, and a good one, too. I took some trouble over this bill of fare, mark you, so I hope you're flattered. They had to send out for these things especially. Anthony had arranged for whiting and cutlets, but I told him to eat them himself, or give them to the poor: I didn't want them. Anthony thinks it's his duty to take care of my digestion. He needn't worry. My digestion's all right, thanks very much, and so forth. It can look after itself. Anthony's

not a bad old sort. For instance, if it hadn't been for him I'd not have been able to sort out you applicants this morning. But Anthony's not above taking five bob in a good cause. Anthony's all right! He generally feeds me pretty well, too. I leave all that to him. It's such a bore to have to order one's meals all the time, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't mind," said Linda.

"Wouldn't you? Well, I do. I say, what'll you drink? There's claret and hock. I hate wine myself, nasty sour stuff. Or do you like beer? How anyone can drink beer beats me. I'd as soon take medicine. But whiskey's the limit. Oh, I shan't ever go down into a drunkard's grave. Give me the good old tap." She poured out water for herself.

"Me too," said Linda. By no means must anything be done to enable this unrestrained young person to overcome a most fortunate distaste.

"What do you think of the father?"

The question came so suddenly that it, for the moment, deprived Linda of speech, a circumstance about which Psyche concerned herself not at all.

"Isn't he a knock-out?" she said, pushing her plate away and leaning back in her chair. "He's unbelievable. Do you know he's been doing nothing else, ever since I can remember, but read novels. He's by way of writing a book about them: 'The History of Anglo-Saxon Fiction,' he calls it, 'from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century.' He's been at it pretty well all *my* life. It's going to be on the comprehensive side, shouldn't you think, Linda? Why, he's read, I expect, every novel that's ever been written. He did for his eyes with it. But do you think that stopped him? Not a bit. He got a reader. That Broddy came three years ago, and now you've come. He just lies listening to novels all day. He hasn't begun to write yet, Broddy tells me; just dictates a criticism now and then. Oh! he expects to become a European celebrity when he's done, I shouldn't wonder. And, of course, he never *will* be done. He never *can* be done with the stuff piling up at the rate of twenty thousand books a year all the time. However fast you read he can't ever overtake it. But I don't believe he cares. *I* believe it's just an

excuse for wasting his time. Ha ! Ha ! That's what *I* think, Linda, old dear."

She nodded and winked at Linda with an air of extraordinary shrewdness ; then pulled her plate towards her and forked a piece of lobster, suddenly. "And who on earth," she asked, holding the morsel in front of her mouth, "wants to read a History of Fiction ? It's the *fiction* they want. Roll the butter along, won't you ?" and her teeth closed on the lobster with a snap.

Linda silently obliged her. Long ago she had satisfied her own desire for lobster salad, but she didn't for that reason wish, by interrupting Psyche's flow of chatter, to hurry the progress of the meal. Linda had never seen anybody in the least like Psyche. Foolish, garrulous young women she had met often and suffered under their merciless streams, but none of them had pleased the eye as did this Psyche, and none of them had revealed themselves with one tenth of Psyche's frankness. Again, selfish and heartless though the girl appeared in her every word, the enjoyment which she evidently took in talking to her guest seemed almost flattering to one who, like Linda, had for so long winced beneath the total indifference of strangers. Linda perceived in her heart that Psyche regarded her simply as an ear, but she could not resist the temptation to believe that the girl was really friendly and desirous of her friendship. It was a pleasant illusion.

Psyche needed no encouragement.

"Anyhow," she proceeded, "it keeps him busy and out of the way. I expect there'd be trouble if he took to looking after me at all. So long as he lets me alone we get on all right. He gives me a very decent allowance and his blessing, and beyond that he don't concern himself about me. You see, my mother died when I was born. I fancy he was very fond of her. That's why he loathes me so. Well, I loathe him, so we're square, aren't we ?"

"Oh, nonsense !" said Linda, shocked by the calm with which Psyche made these appalling statements.

"Not at all," said Psyche as she filled her mouth with lettuce. "It's just how it happens to be."

Linda hastened to change the subject. "You're alone a good deal, then ?" she said.

"Yes, worse luck. But what can I do? I know nobody, practically, in London. The father's got very few relations, and he's quarrelled with them all—except Aunt Rose. She's not a bad sort; takes me to a play now and then, you know. But she's *old*. I mean, none of my *pals* happen to live in London. I never made many, either; I expect I'm too pretty. I only knew three girls at school really well, and one of them lives in Glasgow and the other two in Liverpool. Fat lot of good to *me*, isn't it? The father don't care how much alone I am. He's got his 'History of Anglo-Saxon Fiction' to think about. Hang it! I've hardly spoken to a soul since I came home from school. And it's dull, Linda, it's beastly dull. I've got my *arts*, of course, but they don't make up for having no pals. I expect I'll break out and surprise the father some day.

"Thank Heaven, Georgie's coming here in June," she went on. "That's my pal in Glasgow, Georgie Burns. She'll amuse you, Linda. Regular hot stuff, Georgie is. The father don't object to her coming. *He* don't object to anything I do s'long's I let him alone. Do you know what he said when I asked him? 'My dear Psyche'—she put her napkin over her eyes and leaned back in her chair, her hands folded on her stomach, and spoke in a cruel imitation of her father's voice and manner—"My dear Psyche, mutual tolerance is the keynote of our relations. You do not interfere with my work; I do not interfere with your amusements. By all means have a friend to stay with you; but I would observe that, meanwhile, *I* am occupied.' Ha! Ha!" she laughed shrilly. "That's the father every time."

"Where were you at school?" Linda asked, if only to turn her from her father.

"Eastbourne."

"Oh!" cried Linda joyfully, "you know Sussex, then."

"Is Eastbourne Sussex?"

Linda nodded. She had spoken without thinking, but she understood by this time that the name of Sussex could say nothing to Psyche.

"It is, eh? Very well then; I know Sussex. What of it?"

"Oh, never mind," said Linda. "Only I know it too."

"Do you? Well, I'm sorry for you. A poisonous place. Eastbourne's not bad, but the country round! My dear, not a tree for miles. Just those awful, stupid Downs. Once you're off the golf-course you can go for ever and not see a decent house. Downs are all right for riding, of course; you can get a good gallop; but I don't see much else to do with 'em. I like to have people about when *I'm* riding. What's the good of having a figure like mine and getting up on a horse and going out into a desert?"

"Do you ride here?"

"No," said Psyche, "not now. My nerve's not what it was when I was at school. I'm afraid of horses now, honestly I am. I'm too neurotic."

Linda hid a smile in her napkin. "That must be awful," she said.

"It is," said Psyche. "But it's the penalty one has to pay for having a temperament."

"Oh dear! Have you a temperament as well?" Linda asked.

"Have I a temperament?" cried the girl. "Well, what do *you* think? Will you just look at me for a moment?" Again she pushed her half-eaten plate of mayonnaise away from her and put her elbows where it had been. With her chin in her hands she stared earnestly at Linda as if challenging her to deny the existence of her temperament.

"Go on," said Linda.

Psyche seemed satisfied. She dropped one hand to the table and began to finger a knife.

"Cut up that duck, like a good sort, won't you?" she said. "Lord! I should jolly well say I *had* a temperament. It's my curse. What's the matter with *me* is that I'm too artistic altogether. I don't know where to concentrate. I paint, I play, I sing, I dance, I write. I can do anything if I give my mind to it. I never tried sculpting; not seriously, I mean. I shall some day, though. I've made little things in plasticine for fun; frogs and dogs and things. Jolly good they were, too. But

I never tackled it properly. It's a messy job, and I should loathe handling wet clay—slimy, beastly stuff."

"Don't you act at all?" Linda asked.

"Well, I should say so. Only at school, of course. Why, that's what I'm really best at, acting. That's what I want to *do*. To go on the stage, I mean." She paused dramatically, waiting for Linda's exclamation of envy.

"Stuffing?" said Linda.

"Yes, of course," cried Psyche crossly. "What's a duck without it? It's what you eat duck *for*, isn't it? And, here! Gimme that bit of skin. No, not that one, stupid, *that* one!" She saved the carver further trouble by spiking the desired piece with her own fork. Then with the same hand she grabbed her plate, while with the other she thrust a spoon among the potatoes.

"Do you know any men?" she demanded. Evidently she was not disposed to pursue the subject of the stage with this unsatisfactory listener. "In London, I mean." She fixed Linda with eager eyes.

Suddenly Linda perceived in this child a pupil for Michael. She opened her mouth, then shut it. For just as suddenly she had taken fright at the girl's beauty. The impulse of the friend yielded to the instinctive jealousy of the woman.

Psyche had missed nothing. "You do!" she cried. "You do! Linda, you've got a young man!"

"I haven't," cried Linda, outraged by this attack.

"You have! You have!" shrieked the other. "You have! You have! Linda's got a young man," she sang, inventing a little tune for the words. "Linda's got a young man. You sly thing," she went on. "You've known me all this time and never said a word about him."

"You're mistaken," said Linda coldly. "He's just an old friend."

Psyche laughed shrilly. "I know those old friends," she cried, "I know 'em, bless you! Oh, I'm not so silly as I look-look. I may be little, but I'm fly."

Linda had a sudden fierce desire to cram a half-loaf of brown bread, which lay handy, into the creature's pretty laughing mouth. Never before had she experienced this particular kind of odious annoyance.

"Who is he?" Psyche demanded. "His name, his name! Oh, you old puss! You blush, Linda. You blush!"

Now Linda was quite sure that if she was red in the face (which she denied) it was from anger and from no other cause. To make a serious matter of it would be simply to confirm Psyche in her folly. There was nothing for it but to satisfy her curiosity.

"He's called Hoffman," said Linda. "Michael Hoffman."

"Hoffman," Psyche repeated. "Hoffman." She seemed to taste the flavour of the name. "Linda Hoffman," she said at last. "Not so dusty, is it?"

This was too much. Linda got up. "You can finish your lunch alone," she said, "and to-morrow——"

"Oh, Linda, darling Linda!" screamed Psyche, flinging herself out of her chair and on to Linda's arm. "Don't abandon me. Forgive me. I'll never do it again, I swear I won't. I was only rotting you. I'm ever so sorry. Sit down like a dear thing and call pax. Please."

"You promise?"

"I swear it. Bible oath. Cross my heart. Anything you please, only don't say you won't come to lunch with me."

Linda sat down again.

"Have some more duck?" said Psyche. "Do. You've eaten nothing." This was the first time she had appeared to be aware of her guest's object in sitting at that table. "Oh, you're not finished. Well——" she stretched herself over the cloth and dragged a dish of meringues to her side. "Here!" And she ladled three out into a plate and laid it ready to Linda's hand. "There's something to go on with when you're through." Then she took a couple of meringues on a plate for herself.

Because Linda wished it to be understood clearly that Michael was nothing but an old friend of hers, she forced herself to go on talking about him.

"He's a musician," she said. "Mr. Hoffman, I mean."

"A real one?" asked Psyche. "Not an amateur?" She was evidently interested.

"Certainly," said Linda. "He's a composer."

"A German, eh?"

"No. He learned music in Germany, though."

"Is he clever?"

"Very—I think." Linda was pleased with the girl now.

"Good looking?"

"Yes," said Linda, and, catching a sly look in the other's eye, she added, "fairly."

"Long hair?"

"Pretty long," Linda said, wondering.

"Is he successful?"

"Not yet. But he will be." Linda began to be weary of these questions.

"Has he got evening dress?" asked Psyche.

"Good gracious!" cried Linda. "What on earth do you want to know that for?"

Psyche filled her mouth with meringue and replied, through the sugar:

"Why, it's just an idea I had. Suppose," she suggested, "you bring him along here one evening—what?"

"I don't know," said Linda, her woman's caution rising again. "He's very busy."

"Good. That's the sort I want. That's why I asked if he was an amateur, for I've no convenience for that kind. Look here, Linda. What would you do if you were me, with all sorts of artistic instincts and gifts and ideas? I think you'd want to see a few people now and then, wouldn't you? And clever people, too. My notion, you know," she announced, "is a salon. I want to make my den a centre for clever people. What do you think of it?"

Linda succeeded somehow in not laughing aloud. "It's a very good idea," she said seriously. "But how do you propose to get hold of these clever people of yours? You say you don't know anybody."

"Well," said Psyche, "I think that's all to the good. I don't know anyone, but I'm not loaded up already with a lot of useless, stupid old friends, you see. I start with a clean sheet. Now, if I knew about a thousand people, like any other girl, I'd be most horribly handicapped. They'd always be coming pouring in and crowding me up. And they'd bore the interesting ones to death. I don't want

those kind of mixed-up parties. If I can't know clever people I don't want to know any. And why shouldn't I know clever people? I'm clever, and there's stacks of them in London; there must be. Oh! I've thought it all out. The only difficulty is to begin. Once I can get a few they'll bring others. But the beginning's important. I'm not in any real hurry, but I've been home six months now and I *am* getting a bit fed with it. I can go to Aunt Rose's, but it's ghastly dull there. I want friends of my own *here*. I'm fit to talk to something better than Eliza, I imagine. Well, here's this friend of yours, this Mr. Hoffman. Do you think he'd do for me to begin with? He's a real musician. Well, that's what I must have. I want to have lots of music at my evenings; new music, you know, that's not been published, but is going to be. And he could play the accompaniments for the singers; real singers, you know, Linda: Caruso, and people like that."

"I should certainly have Caruso," said Linda.

"Well, that's for by-and-by. But meanwhile I want to get started. Do you think Mr. Hoffman is good enough to begin with? Of course, I don't hope to get European celebrities at once. For instance, does your Mr. Hoffman know many artists?"

Linda's jealousy suddenly departed. She had decided that Michael must see this girl. Psyche was too impossibly precious to be kept hidden, and Michael needed all the entertainment he could get. If singing lessons followed the meeting so much the better. But she doubted if Michael was a big enough man to give lessons to Psyche Whittaker.

"He knows a certain number of artistic people, I think," she said.

"He does? He does? Oh, you must bring him along, Linda!"

"Very well," said Linda. "I'll ask him next time I see him."

"That's my good Linda. Shall you see him soon—to-night?"

"No," said Linda, "I don't expect so."

"Well, hurry up. I'm longing to know him."

"I'll do my best for you, Psyche," said Linda. "And of course," she added, curiously, "when you've got to know the really famous men and women through him you can drop him quite easily, can't you?"

"Yes, of course I can," said Psyche. "You say he's got evening dress?"

"Yes."

"I don't want shabby people, you know. They give the wrong tone. I don't mean people to say that I collect my guests out of the street at a shilling a head for the evening."

"Quite right," said Linda.

"I'm glad you like the idea of my salon," said Psyche. "You must come and help me entertain them, Linda. They'll want somebody to be brilliant to, I expect. Look here, you've not seen my den yet. Let's have coffee and a smoke in there, shan't we? and go into this scheme properly. And I want to show you my sketches, and I'll dance for you, if you're good. And we'll be comfortable in there. I never *can* talk in this old dining-room."

So they went into the den.

CHAPTER VIII

I

LINDA, after leaving a note at Michael's lodgings to say that she had got the billet—this took her half an hour out of her way—went straight to her flat. Here she meant to prepare a meal for herself from the tea, the bread, and the egg which were in her cupboard, and then go straight to bed. Though she was once more in employment, though that employment looked as if it would continue, though it was well paid, this was not the occasion for an indulgence in a restaurant meal. She had eaten a big dinner the night before, and she had lunched marvellously that morning, and she was in debt. It would be a sin to spend money to-night. As she walked along she calculated the time which must pass before she could settle matters between herself and Michael. At that period the money she owed to Michael was one of the chief facts of Linda's life. It oppressed her with an unbanishable sense of guilt. She might tell herself as often as she cared that she was an idiot to be miserable because of this matter, that any other girl would have done the same, that it would have been cruel to refuse such an offer from such a friend, that Michael could perfectly well afford to let her have the money, that she owed it to herself not to throw up the sponge while there remained a chance of winning her battle ; still, she could not be happy about her debt.

However surprised young women are popularly supposed to be when young men inform them that they are loved, I think it must be only very rarely that a girl is genuinely astonished by such a declaration. Linda, at any rate, could make a very good guess at Michael's sentiments

towards herself. When she had begun to suspect them she couldn't say. Not before the first loan—this she told herself with passionate emphasis ; not before the first loan. She was certain that until the first loan she had believed Michael and herself to be nothing more than the best of comrades.

Even under that belief she would not have accepted his help if it had not been offered at a moment when she was desperate, dead tired with a long day's search for work, certain that on the morrow she was to be put out of her flat, shrinking miserably from the return to her family which seemed at last inevitable—a failure. She had not had the strength to resist him, her good friend, very long.

So he had persuaded her, that first time ; and again he had done it, and again. Of course, it had been easier for him those other times. Her arguments had lost all their weight and his had only become stronger. Again and yet again she had been unable to deny him, not though she now had a piece of knowledge which was worth all the world to her. He loved her. He had loved her for months—at the time of the first loan and long before that. And she had never suspected it until . . . When had she suspected it ? When ?

Not until after the first loan, at any rate. That was settled. But if after it, when ? The doubts she had on this point arose from her present knowledge. Certain things which she now saw in his eyes and heard in his voice, things which she now comprehended fully, she remembered to have seen and heard long ago, but without understanding them. This was what confused her as to the time of her first clear perception of those things.

She knew that she had not comprehended them before the first loan because, had she done so, she would never have accepted the loan. Never ! Never ! Never !

But she had accepted other loans since she had known. Yes, she had. And she gloried in it. For her only wish now was to accept everything from him that he would give her, if only she might give him everything that he would accept.

But this wish had been born only since the loan. Only, you understand, since the loan. She insisted on this with

herself. Linda was no cleverer at self-deception than most of us, but she made up in its emphasis for the weakness of her persuasion.

Her position, violently asserted, may be summarised thus: Before the loan, friendship only, nothing but friendship; no suspicion of anything else anywhere. After the loan, what you please. What had happened after the loan couldn't be helped. For good or ill she loved Michael, and she knew that he loved her. It was impossible for Linda to hate the fact of the loan, but she always tried very hard to do it. She almost believed, indeed, that she did.

II

Outside her door she found Michael sitting on the stairs. The air of the landing was heavy with the smell of Virginia tobacco.

"Well?" he asked.

"I've got it," she said. She was hardly surprised to see him. He was often there when she got home. Had her mind been less busy going over certain well-worn ground as her body travelled through certain well-known streets, the possibility of his being there, waiting for her, might have occurred to her, to hurry her steps.

"Good business," he said. "Open the door, and you can tell me all about it while we eat."

They went into the little two-roomed place with its kitchen to the right and its living-room to the left of the passage. First, Michael pulled off Linda's boots, and then, while Linda set the kettle and saucepan to their business on the gas-stove in the kitchen, removed her hat and arranged her hair to her liking, he started a fire in the living

room, spread a little table there with bread and butter and tea-things from the cupboard, unpacked some charcuterie which he had bought in one of the German shops, and arranged some flowers he had for her in the one vase which stood on the chimney-piece.

At last Linda came in with her egg, boiled, and the tea-pot, and not until they had begun their meal was any further news exchanged. They believed firmly in being comfortable while they talked.

"Well?" said Michael.

Linda told her story, munching olives and ham, as she lay on the little bed, while from time to time Michael filled her cup and buttered thick slices of bread for her. Frequently he laughed, for Linda could generally make her experiences amusing, and her circumstances at the moment were only favourable to this faculty. She was as happy, for all her fatigue, as she had been dismal the night before. She found it impossible to present the interior of No. 108 Pontefract Terrace in any light other than a comical one. She was quite aware of its tragic aspect, but under the influence of food, tea, Michael, a cosy room, the removal of her stays, the consciousness that a day's work was done, and the prospect of thirty-three shillings a week certain for an indefinite period, she found it very hard to keep the tragic aspect of anything before her mind.

Her narrative carried them into the cigarette stage. The pompous, plump man on his sofa listening through the best years of his life to Anglo-Saxon fiction, good, bad, and indifferent, under the belief that he was preparing himself for the erection of a literary monument; the girl with her horrid jargon of slang and her exquisite face, her capricious, catlike ways, her sudden amiabilities and her sudden arrogances, her unfortunate familiarity with the servants, her costly furniture and her tawdry knick-knacks and her ink blot; the respectable butler with his smile, tolerant of his mistress's inability to recognise the social distinctions; the maid Eliza with her stupid grin and her hostile stare;—all these things became food for Linda's humour rather than her sorrow. There was no cruelty in Linda anywhere, but her own comfort and peace of mind were so great that evening that she could not see clearly. She was drugged

with the herb of present affluence which causes most of us to jest now and then about, for example, the marches of the unemployable.

Michael, who was this evening in the highest good spirits, readily engaged himself as the nucleus of Psyche's salon. For some time after this matter had been settled he would do nothing but imagine the musical and theatrical celebrities whom he should introduce to that exclusive atmosphere. There were two cross-talk comedians, Blooter and Salt, whose acquaintance he had recently made at a smoking concert in the artist's room ; and he thought he could get hold of a certain Miss Maidie Shuster, a principal boy of amazing stoutness, whose cousin was stage door-keeper in some small suburban theatre which Michael had visited on business recently. He had been fascinated by Miss Shuster's shape as she leaned swearing fiercely against the door of the cage, and, asking about her, had discovered to his amazement that the door-keeper was extremely proud of his relationship to this terrifying woman. "Of course," said Michael, "when we've used the man to acquire his cousin for your young friend we will cut him out. I'm convinced he hasn't any evening clothes." He also proposed the names of a negro sword swallower and the office boy of Messrs. Fielden & Wauchope, a firm of publishers for whom he sometimes worked.

" You should see her den," Linda said, interrupting these amiable plans, " we went in there after lunch. There was a whole shopful of photographs, nearly all actors and actresses, scattered about on the walls. There were palms in pots in the corners, and a tiger skin and an easel. Sometimes she calls the room her den and sometimes her studio. There's 'Christ and Diana' hanging among the photographs, and that picture of a man biting a girl's finger, and one of Marcus Stone's things. She has a player-piano in there, and she sat down at once and started to play some bits from 'Peggy.' But she got tired of it before I did. Then she wanted to sketch me, and got out a board and some charcoal and dashed at it enthusiastically for about five minutes, until something somebody said diverted her poor little attention and she began to hold forth, and forgot what she was doing. Presently she jumped down from

the big sofa she was in and declared she would dance for me. She made me grind out a waltz on the player for her and pranced about all over the room till it was ended. She actually got through that. If she would only learn to dance she'd be pretty good at it, I think ; but that's her trouble, poor little soul. She thinks she can do everything without learning. She sang, too—oh, Michael, it was pitiful the way she showed off !—one of those things we had last night. She played her own accompaniment, slap-dash, six notes right in seven, and her voice is only a twitter. She was just going to read me a poem she'd written when the gong sounded and I had to go back to her father. I'm really sorry for her, but she's too funny for words all the same."

"Go on," said Michael. "How did you find the student of Anglo-Saxon fiction ? Quite comfortable, I hope ? "

"He looked it. He was just where I'd left him, shade over his face, hands in his dressing-gown pockets, feet crossed, quite still. I suppose he'd had some lunch, but there was no sign of it. Of course he didn't think it necessary to ask if I'd enjoyed mine.

"He said as I came in : 'On future days, Miss Brook, I hope you will arrive, after the luncheon interval, when the gong is *struck*.' I saw by the clock that I was three minutes late. Pompous idiot ! I said I was sorry and would try to do better. And I picked up 'The Scalp Hunters' to go on with it. He waved my regrets away with his nasty white hand, and said : 'The mornings, Miss Brook, I dedicate to the work of dead authors. The afternoons I devote to current fiction. On the book-case you will find John Passmore's last novel. Pray read it.' So he doesn't *yet* know who those 'prairie men' were. I read John Passmore to him till six. I regretted my 'Scalp Hunters,' Michael. But I shall get back to them to-morrow at ten."

"He seems to have a method in his madness," said Michael.

"Oh, he's methodical," she said, "and you're right about his being mad. He must be, Michael. Look at the way he treats that girl. Pays her a big cheque

once a month and washes his hands of her. Either he's insane or else he's never so much as looked at her mouth."

"Well?" Michael prompted.

"Well, at five o'clock the butler brought in tea and poured out a cup for Whittaker. He takes saccharine, Michael. When we were alone he said: 'You have thirty minutes, Miss Brook, for recreation. I suggest that you rise and walk about the room. Lengthened sitting induces a stiffness of the limbs. Pray walk about. Miss Brodrib used always to walk about.' He absolutely startled me with that, for I'd supposed that he had forgotten that such a person as Miss Brodrib had ever existed.

"So I rose and walked about the room in dead silence for his thirty minutes. I didn't want to, but I didn't dare to sit down until he told me. He paralyses my will, Michael," she explained. "Officially the man was alone. I think it was only to save his precious time that I wasn't sent elsewhere for my tea."

"Well," said Michael, "he pays you thirty-three bob a week, and he doesn't seem likely to make love to you. I don't see that you're badly off."

"Nor I. I'm very grateful, of course. But if he'd only give some sign that he knows I'm a human being! I suppose it's that sort of thing which makes servant-girls marry consumptive signalmen. They can't stand being furniture any longer."

"How did you part?"

"At six it was: 'That will do, Miss Brook. Till tomorrow, then, at ten. Good-night, Miss Brook.' And I said 'Good-night, Mr. Whittaker,' and out I stumbled like any Brodrib. He'll break my spirit, Michael."

"You see all you can of that Psyche," said Michael. "She'll provide an antidote."

"But just imagine him. He never gave me a word of thanks."

"Why should he?" said Michael. "He's paying you, my poor Linda."

"Oh," she burst out. "He's preposterous, with his green shade and his punctuality and his fat, well-clothed body. He ought to have a phonograph to recite his Anglo-Saxon

fiction to him. Then he could connect it with Greenwich Observatory and be sure of every second."

"Cultivate Psyche," said Michael, nodding his head at her.

"I mean to," she assured him. "And, by the way, when'll you come to see her? I promised you quickly."

Michael was silent for a moment. "Oh," he said at last, "I'll come some day all right."

"Well, why not to-morrow?"

"No," he said, "I can't manage to-morrow, I'm afraid."

"Then the day after."

Again he hesitated. "No, Linda," he said, "nor the day after."

"Well, when?" Linda wanted him to see Psyche.

"I suppose I've got to tell you," he said. "I wanted to, but—"

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Well, I didn't want to, either. It's not absolutely certain yet, you see."

"What isn't?"

"The fact is," he said, "your little friend Psyche'll have to wait a while for her first celebrity. I'm going to be busy."

"Good," said Linda. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't mean to tell you," he said, "until the contract was signed." His voice made her sit up suddenly.

"Contract?" she cried. "What contract?"

"You know this Orde," he said, "my new discovery, the gent who sets the Three Part Song to music and pays me to make it fit to be published?"

"Yes. What of him?"

"He is, as you know, a person of fabulous wealth."

"Well?"

"We are collaborators."

"How?"

"We're going," said Michael, "to write a play; his words, my music."

"Michael!" she cried. "How splendid!"

"And," said Michael, "he's going to finance it—a West End production."

"Michael!"

His eyes were large with excitement and his breath came short. He got up and went across to her, holding out his hand to be shaken.

"Yes," he said huskily, "it's my Chance. It's come. I've got it. My Chance, Linda. Do you understand? My Chance."

CHAPTER IX

NOW will you, for a moment, consider this Mr. Bertram Orde, upon whom so much depends?

I suppose that at all times there have been wealthy young men who have desired to be taken for artists, but never, I think, can there have been so many of these people as to-day. For, first, we have never before seen so much money about in the world, and, secondly, we have never before expended so much admiration upon the artist. We used to think more highly of the soldier than of anyone else, but we admire the soldier now only when we desire him to go out and be killed instead of ourselves. At other times we rather despise him, and the artist has altogether cut him out in our affections. We despise the artist too—when he is unsuccessful; but let him make a name for himself and we cannot do enough for him, or see enough of him.

Thus to-day when a young man has a rich father, he very commonly becomes an artist. Trade, of course, is out of the question for him; soldiering is a bore, and perhaps he does not fancy motoring, fears to be an aviator, and is too indolent to make golf the reason for his existence. What else, then, should he do but take up painting, letters, music, or something of the sort? He has got every desirable thing except the consideration of his fellows. Can we blame him if he grasps the easiest means completely to fill the cup of his happiness?

Such a young man was Bertram Orde.

His parentage is of small importance. Of his mother it is enough if I tell you that she lived in lonely splendour somewhere in Collingham Gardens. Concerning his father I need only say that he was dead; for had he still lived

Orde would not have been able to contemplate the production of plays.

How the elder Orde made his money does not matter at all ; perhaps from gin, or possibly furniture. Pills, tea-shops, wall-paper, knife-grinders, a toffee for frog in the throat—half a thousand things suggest themselves. Here you may please yourself entirely. For me the fact that he had it suffices. It was there ; and there was a monstrous lot of it. Orde, at any rate, was the last man in the world to force the knowledge of its source upon anybody else. So far as he was concerned his money was no longer tainted by the flavour of any origin whatever. It was.

Like nearly everybody else Orde possessed a certain feeling for rhythm, and like thousands of other people he could compound a little tune from two or three of the many little tunes he knew. And since he had, over and above these priceless gifts, far more money than he knew how to spend, what more natural than that an artist's career should allure the fortunate fellow ?

Understand me. He had no wish to be an artist ; his only ambition was to be taken for one.

For Orde, the artist was not an obscure person living on bread and water in a garret because he will not feed his belly at the expense of his soul. Rather was he a curled and scented personage, faring sumptuously every day, clothed in soft raiment, dwelling in a palace filled with beautiful and costly things, caressed by the great ones of the earth, persecuted by the attentions of lovely and noble ladies. Orde was still young enough to think that he had lost all his ideals, but though he would not have admitted it, this one remained.

He felt hardly any pleasure while he was turning his verses or writing his dialogue or discovering his melodies. His ears as he wrought were stretched for the praise that by these things he should win. The rhyme, or what not, was to make people say, "Orde is a clever fellow." His art was a means to an end, not an end in itself. And the end he sought was popular applause.

Now, the desire for other people's praise is an inevitable weakness of the artist. I doubt if any creator ever succeeded in dispensing for long altogether with external

appreciation ; his suicide under such conditions could be nothing but a matter of months. If it is only his landlady who exclaims her delight, some such tickling his ears must receive. There is, however, a wide difference between this natural craving and Orde's appetite. His sweetest dream (that you may understand this matter at once) exhibited himself standing before a curtain, illuminated by footlights, and bowing repeatedly to a thronged theatre, every person in which was clapping and cheering. This, I say, was his sweetest dream. But he had others hardly less delicious. There was, for instance, the vision in which he strolled through busy streets among turned heads and pointing fingers ; and all about him ran the whisper, "That's him ! " Again, he would be surrounded by newspapers and magazines from whose pages innumerable portraits and caricatures of himself gazed triumphantly upon him. Again, he was interviewed, and dictated information respecting his personal habits to a journalist, frenziedly and delightedly scribbling : out in the hall, he knew, the press waited in dozens, all sharpening and licking their pencils.

Orde, you are to understand, desired in no way the respect, for his productions, of the discriminating few while he lived, and the erection to himself of a large statue after he should be dead. He knew exactly how much that kind of thing is worth. He sought, more sanely perhaps—who shall say ?—a wide and immediate success. And now that I think of it, I was wrong in my selection of a sweetest among this young man's dreams. Even that popular applause which he courted was but a means to an end. I suppose that Orde's ambition was simply to be in the Artistic Swim. Let us say then—and be done with Orde's dreams—that none could yield him a greater satisfaction, and from none did he wake to a profounder disappointment than the following.

The scene was, generally, the Savoy Hotel. In a corner (not too retired) of the dining-room a cosy little party sat at, usually, luncheon. The guests might be the current Prime Minister, a Russian Grand Duke, the High Priest of the Latest Insanity afflicting, for instance, the painters of Denmark, the Greatest Manager on Earth ; then, the

most Beautiful Woman of America, the Most Immoral Lady Novelist of England, the most Exquisite Comedienne of France, the Most Voluptuous Exponent of Eastern Dancing ever seen, and her aunt. The long room was crowded, but all present were fully aware of the importance of this luncheon party, upon whose easy host a converging fire of envious, admiring, or merely affectionate glances from every quarter was directed. For him the *maître d'hôtel* had a special smile ; for him the rarest chef in Europe served up prodigies of art ; for him the bandsmen instantly played such airs as his guests desired ; and Great Bohemians, strolling to the lounge, went yards out of their way to claim his hand and call him "Ordie."

I have said enough to show you the heart's desire of this simple fellow ; and now, but one word upon the method which he proposed to himself for attaining it.

No man can do more than employ, for the attainment of his heart's desire, the means he has. Orde's equipment in his struggle towards eminence consisted of a scanty talent and a pot of money. For such a man to supplement the first by the second was as simple as brushing his hair. Not a qualm disturbed him. He understood that he would be an ass to wait for publishers to make him famous at their own expense when (as he believed) he could so much more quickly obtain the same result by paying them to do it. Orde was in a hurry for that Savoy luncheon.

The common voice denies the artist all skill in the conduct of affairs. Anyone, therefore, who desires to be thought an artist does well to disclaim business capacity ; for by letting it be supposed that he is able to look after himself he provides food for suspicion of his genius.

Orde therefore was accustomed to declare that he was in all matters of business quite hopeless. This not only strengthened his own and other people's opinion of his gifts, but caused him to feel deliciously superior to his father. Now the legitimate ambition of all young men is to be better men than their fathers ; the better the father, the finer the wish. This side of Orde's ambition, however, was not beautiful. Like most people who enjoy the fruits of other people's hard work, he shuddered at the thought of trade, and it gave him a pleasant sensation to suppose

that because he was something like an artist he was therefore made of a finer clay than his father.

In many ways, however, this young man showed that a taint of the dirty huckstering spirit, which he so abysmally contemned, had been bequeathed to him together with his great possessions by his progenitor.

His relations with Messrs. Pagenbauer, for instance, show that he was not quite blind to the advantages of money; the care, also, with which he abstained from tampering with the securities in which his trustees had placed his wealth. So much came to him each year that, oddly enough, he did not wish for more; but admirable and unusual though such conduct may be in the inheritor of a fortune, it suggests that the contemptible inartistic quality of caution was Orde's in spite of himself.

Nor are you to imagine that when you find him contemplating the outlay of several thousands of pounds upon the production of a play you may point to an act of undoubted rashness which triumphantly vindicates his claim to artistry. Not at all. This was money which he had by him, surplus income. For his means Orde lived very quietly, and he was perpetually troubled about the safe bestowal of cash. What he proposed to spend on this play meant very little to him; had he cared for grouse-moors and steam-yachts and things of that kind he would still have had it to spend. He regarded the enterprise which he was undertaking as an investment, not in the ordinary sense of the word, as a source of future revenue, but rather as a foundation-stone for the edifice of his artistic fortunes. By his riches he chiefly meant to climb. Thus did we find him (on making his acquaintance) distributing drink among the lesser members of the theatrical profession. Mr. Ray was a low rung of a ladder; Mr. Hoffman at first sight seemed an even lower one. If, later, he assumed a more important aspect in Orde's eyes, this was just a matter of luck. Yet it was only by standing whiskey to Ray that Hoffman was secured, and here is a proof of the wisdom of Orde's policy. "For by knowing small actors"—so Orde may be supposed to have argued—"I shall come to know other actors, greater actors, and if I will only pay constantly for refreshment, the greatest

actors of all. Incidentally I may achieve a reputation as a librettist, and so lunch, at last, in the Savoy with desirable and brilliant persons. I am a clever fellow and I have heaps of money. Go to ! let me ascend among the talents."

If, therefore, he is found to be eager to finance a play it must not be supposed that money was his object. Speculation of any kind was abhorrent to his careful soul, and he would as soon have thought of increasing his means in the theatre as of dealing in rubber with the same view. But a few thousands would be well spent if they should bear him into that world of fashionable art which was the goal of his hopes, and into which his abilities alone could hardly hasten him.

So much, then, at this time, for Orde and his ambitions.

CHAPTER X

LINDA'S second luncheon at Pontefract Terrace differed from her first principally in the character of the victuals. Psyche's interest in her new friend was still great enough to bring her into the hall on the stroke of one to meet Linda, but it had not been equal to the trouble of thinking out a second menu. Instead, therefore, of lobster, duck, and meringues they had tomato soup, a fillet of beef, and an apple charlotte, a meal, no doubt, perfectly in accordance with Anthony's views upon the fare most suitable for young ladies.

Linda didn't mind. The food was too good and plentiful for her to quarrel with it because it was wholesome ; and Psyche didn't seem to notice the simplicity of what she was eating. Like most women, she didn't at any time love food enough to trouble herself much about it ; and that morning she had a great deal to say. It was not, however, till they were in the den that she opened out on Linda about Michael and her salon.

"Have you seen Mr. Hoffman yet ?" she asked carelessly, as she lit her first cigarette.

"As a matter of fact," said Linda, "I did, last night."

"And will he come to see me ?"

"Yes. He hopes to. He'll be very glad."

"When ? To-night ?"

"As soon as he can," said Linda cautiously.

"Then let's say to-morrow," said Psyche. "By the way, does he know any theatrical people ?"

"Not many—yet," said Linda ; "but—"

Psyche didn't wait for her to finish. "Never mind," she said. "He must bring them all along to the salon. I want to know theatrical people particularly. You see"—

she paused as she had done the day before—"I'm going on the stage myself."

She had better luck this time, for Linda welcomed this diversion of the talk from Michael.

"What on earth," she asked, "should *you* want to go on the stage for? *You* don't have to work for a living."

"What's that got to do with it? Why should I *not* act, simply because I've got a rich father. If I've got it in me it ought to come out, Linda. That's what *I* say. An artist is bound to express herself. It's a duty, isn't it?"

"Well, perhaps—if she's certain she is an artist."

"Well, I *am*. I played lead two years at school, and everyone said I was top-hole. Besides, I want to."

"Why not stick to amateur work?"

"Pah!" said Psyche.

"I dare say it's not the best kind," said Linda; "but you wouldn't be taking the bread out of other girls' mouths, at any rate."

"I dare say not. But that's their affair. Why mustn't I act because I can afford not to? I don't see it. Suppose my father died and left me without any money?"

"There'd be a difference then," said Linda.

"What? What difference would it make except that I'd *have* to do something for my living?"

Linda despaired of ever making the pampered child understand that particular difference.

"The world of art," said Psyche largely, "is a republic. Everybody says so. There's no question of income in the world of art. All artists start level, *as* artists. P'raps they work harder if they've got no money. But if they work hard *and* have money, all the more praise to them. They aren't called on to consider whether they're cutting the ground from under somebody else's feet. What about the good old parable of the talents? Weren't we intended to make the best use we can of our gifts? Very well, then! Oh! I've thought it all out, Linda. Why, we had a debate at school only last year on this very thing, and I made a speech that convinced *everybody*. I've just given you a bit of it, you know."

"Well," said Linda, "you haven't convinced *me*."

"Oh, that's just because you're an obstinate old thing. But I don't care. Anyhow, I'm going on the stage. I mean it."

"When?" asked Linda.

Psyche lit a new cigarette. "Oh, I dunno," she said. "Some day. There's no hurry. I could get on any time, I expect. I wish I knew how one did get on—in the West End, I mean, of course; I don't want to tour. But I don't know anybody who could give me an introduction to a West End manager—Foscari or somebody like that. Do you think your Mr. Hoffman could?"

"I'm afraid not," said Linda.

"You see," said Psyche, "if I once got a start I'd be bound to get on. With a face and a figure like mine I couldn't help it. Look at all those girls that you see in *The Sketch*. I can knock spots out of them—and I will too. But how does one *begin* if one hasn't got an introduction? What do you *do*, Linda? I suppose I could go round to a manager's office and just apply for a part. Georgie Burns used to say that was what one did. But I don't like to do that. I'm afraid. One hears such awful stories of actors. You see, Linda, I'm so rottenly ignorant. I must ask Georgie all about it when she comes. She knows a lot, Georgie does, about the stage and everything. Now look here, Linda. I sing jolly well, and I can dance like a bird. I always did a solo at Madame's display. I say, Linda, do you think I could do anything at it, honestly now?"

"What does your father say about it?" Linda asked.

"He? Oh, he don't care one way or the other. I can go on the stage or to the devil or anywhere else, just as I please. Oh, he's no end of a good father, I don't think. He's just all selfish, and if there's one thing I loathe it's selfishness. Don't you? But you're not to think I'm sorry for myself, Linda," she cried. "Not a bit of it. If he can do without me, I can do without him. At least, I shall be able to soon. For I'm saving up, Linda. I've got a nice little lot in the bank already. Oh, I don't mean to stick this life for ever, and the father gives me quite enough to save out of. He thinks I spend it all on gowns and chocolates. Hah! Little he knows. Just let him wait a while. He'll sit up a bit, don't you think, when one

day he sees Miss Psyche Van Loo's name in all the papers?"

"Van Loo?" said Linda.

"Well," cried Psyche, "you don't think I'm going on the stage with a name like Whittaker, do you? Bourgeois isn't the word for it. I'd sooner be Smith or Jones any day. Yes, Van Loo's the name I've chosen. Psyche Van Loo. What do *you* think of it?"

"It's as good as another," said Linda.

"Well, *you* don't need to like it. It's good enough for *me*. I suppose you don't think very much of Psyche, either?"

"Not at all," said Linda, "I think it's very pretty."

Psyche clapped her hands in delight. "So do I," she cried. "That's why I took it. You didn't suppose the father would call a child of his *Psyche*, did you?"

"I confess——" Linda began.

"Oh, don't worry to. You didn't. You couldn't. Of course he called me Prudence. I don't wonder you grin. Prudence! Oh lor! Linda, did you ever hear the like of it for me? I took Psyche when I was ten. It was in a story book I had, and I liked it and took it. He *was* mad. That was the first battle we had in which I whipped, and I've whipped ever since. He whipped *me*, by the way, before he gave in, five times. But I simply wouldn't answer to Prudence, and he got tired after a time. He's not very much pith, the father hasn't. Why, I was just beginning to enjoy it when he caved in. He's quite used to Psyche now. I wonder if he'll ever get used to Van Loo. By the way," she broke off, "I've got some Psyche Van Loo cards here. I had 'em done to see how it looked."

She jumped off the sofa and began to rummage in a drawer of her desk, but as she did not at once find what she sought, she lost interest in her professional cards.

"Never mind," she said, as she slammed the drawer back; "I'll dig them out some other time. Well, when's Mr. Hoffman coming to see me?"

"As soon as he can," said Linda, as before.

"What do you mean as soon as he can? Why can't he come at once?" Linda perceived that this time Psyche meant to have a definite answer.

"Well, he's very busy just now," she said.

"Oh, busy be blowed ! What's made him so busy all of a sudden ? He's nobody in particular, is he ? "

"He's only got the music of a *play* to write," said Linda calmly. She could not resist the temptation to stagger the girl.

"No!" Psyche shrieked. "A real play?"

"Yes," said Linda.

"Oh, lovely ! Why, he *must* be clever ! "

"He is," said Linda.

"Tell me all about it," said Psyche. "Just wait till I get this hookah going and then you shall have it all your own way. I'll be as quiet as a little mouse. Golly ! A whole play. Whose ? "

"It's with a man called 'Orde,'" said Linda, "that he's just met. I think Orde's going to finance it. Isn't it splendid ? "

"Georgeous ! Who's Orde ? "

"I don't know anything about him. He seems to be well off, though."

Psyche puffed away, reflecting. "When's the play to be put on ?" she asked at last.

"Oh, it's not written yet, you know."

"No," said Psyche, "I suppose not. Never mind. You must bring Mr. Hoffman very soon. He shall play me his music, the music of his play. It'll be lovely. Think of hearing it all, months, perhaps, before London does. Oh, you'll bring him, won't you ? "

"I'll try," said Linda.

Psyche again reflected. "And this Orde," she said ; "p'raps he'd bring Orde."

"We'll see," said Linda.

"He must. He shall. Oh, that's just the kind of thing I want ! to have two men in this room playing and singing all the things that London's going to applaud in the sweet by-and-by. It'll be delicious !" At this moment the gong roared. "Oh, dash it !" she cried. "There's your tip to go to the father. What a bore ! It always interrupts us at the most interesting places."

Linda was already halfway across the room. "Good-bye," she said ; "we'll go on to-morrow."

" Right oh ! " cried Psyche, waving a hand to her from the sofa. " Ta-ta, Linda ! Toodle-oo ! "

After Linda had gone she sat smoking for quite a quarter of an hour, perfectly still. Then she got up and rummaged again in the drawer of her desk. At last she gave a little cry of delight. She had found the Psyche Van Loo cards.

CHAPTER XI

I

IT took Michael hardly any time to plumb the shallows of Orde's capabilities. The fellow was empty. A sort of turn for verses and dialogue he had, to be sure, but there he came to an end. Invention he had none, to call invention. Give him an idea, and he could make a lyric out of it that would scan and sing comfortably ; sketch him a scene, and he would prepare some lines that were good enough—to employ Mr. Ray's pleasant words—for the blue pencil ; hand him a plot, and he would make a book that was no worse than the book of any other musical play.

The first evening's work on their scenario showed Michael that his collaborator would bring him very little ; but if he should be willing to receive, Michael didn't mind. He preferred that Orde should be merely receptive, for this would save them both a heap of trouble. Let him turn what he should be told into lyrics and dialogue and foot the bill ; Michael needed no more from him.

Like many musicians who set out to write a play, Michael put small faith in the words that carried his music. He regarded them simply as a vehicle for sound. If they were good words, well ; if not, it didn't much matter. So long as they didn't interfere with the music and made sense, almost any words were satisfactory. The music was the thing.

But if the words themselves were unimportant the construction of the book was vital ; on that depended the sequence of the numbers and their inter-relation. Without

a properly constructed book a properly constructed score was impossible.

You perceive that Michael meant "The Conspiracy at Capri" to be a comic opera. Upon this point battle was joined within ten seconds of their sitting down to work on their first evening together.

They had agreed that Michael should dictate all that he had imagined for his play, number and scene by number and scene, and that this rough plot should form the basis of a more detailed scenario. When Orde, stretched in a big chair with a block of paper on his knees, a gold fountain-pen in his hand, and a long cigar between his teeth, declared himself ready, Michael, spouting the smoke of a Virginian cigarette, began to walk violently about the room with his hands in his pockets, and to talk with tremendous rapidity.

"The scene of this play," he said, "is laid in Capri. The period is indefinite, depending on the sort of dresses we want. So long as it isn't modern—"

"Steady on," said Orde. "Go a bit slower, my dear chap. I'm not a shorthand writer, you know. Depending on what?"

"Oh, the sort of dresses we want. So long as it isn't modern—"

Orde laid down his pen. "But," he said, "we shall want modern dresses—for some of the girls, at any rate. That's what the women go to see."

"Not in this play," said Michael. "This isn't a musical comedy, you know."

"Oh," said Orde doubtfully, "isn't it?"

"No," said Michael, stopping and fixing him with a steady eye, "it's a comic opera, Orde."

"Oh," said Orde, still more doubtfully, "is it?"

"Yes," said Michael, "it is."

"Oh," said Orde. There was a short silence. "Comic opera's a pretty doubtful proposition," he said at last. "They've tried it again and again, and it's never gone. Not since Gilbert and Sullivan."

"It's never been *done*," said Michael, "that's why. They start with a comic opera and then get frightened and begin to monkey it about with extra turns and so forth,

and they end by serving up nothing at all, neither comic opera nor musical comedy. No wonder the people stay away. It's not good enough for the folk who want comic opera, and it's not rotten enough for the folk who want musical comedy. That's what's the matter with it. But if anyone'll have the guts to give them the real thing, you'll see the kind of proposition comic opera is."

"There was 'Lucette,'" said Orde. "That was comic opera all right."

"Yes," said Michael, "and there was 'The Fan.' But did you happen to hear the tripe they called music in those pieces? Lord love you, Orde, don't quote 'Lucette' and 'The Fan' to me."

"Of course," said Orde, "there's nothing wrong with your music, old man, but——"

"Look here, Orde," said Michael. "This is important. It's no good our going on if you won't let me have my way here. I'll give the comedians some rope, of course, but *my* play's going to be comic opera or it's not going to be put on. Do you understand?"

Orde felt a vicious impulse to jump up, open the door, and invite this Mr. Hoffman, who thought so much of himself, to go to the devil. He would give the comedians some rope, would he? and in *his* play? And very much obliged to him! One would think that a man in his position would be a bit more careful. He would give the comedians rope! *He* would! One would suppose that *he* was paying for this production. He would give the comedians rope! Well, even though he didn't expect any funny lines from his collaborator he needn't say so. This Mr. God-Almighty Hoffman would have to be put in his place. But not now. No, this wasn't the moment. Orde suppressed his impulse to quarrel. He knew that a good deal can happen to a book and a score between the beginning of rehearsals and the first performance. The producer can be trusted to see to all that. Chalkley, he remembered, had gassed along very much in the same style; not so arrogantly, perhaps, but to the same effect. Musicians were all alike, damn them!

"Very good, old man," he said soothingly. "I expect you're right. Go on. Spit it out."

Michael accepted the surrender without comment, a circumstance which aggravated Orde's irritation, and he continued.

"The first act is laid in the Town Square at Capri. The second, in the gardens of the Prince of Capri."

"Did Capri ever have a prince?" asked Orde.

"Oh, what the hell does it matter?" cried Michael. "For God's sake don't interrupt me, old boy. I'm thinking." This was as much as to say "You're only writing."

Orde bit his lip and registered yet another score to be paid off. "Sorry," he said stiffly.

"The third act is in the Blue Grotto. That'll cost a bit, Orde, but it's worth it. It should be a paralysing scene. I know exactly how I want it. The chorus enters in boats. That's where that barcarolle comes in."

"Excellent," said Orde. "Go on." And Michael delivered himself of a formidable list of characters.

II

This first evening's work showed Michael that it is one thing for a man to construct a play in his head and quite another for him to put it on paper. He had pondered and plotted this story of his at many odd times through many months, and he embarked upon the task of dictating it all off with a light enough heart. Only now did he discover in how many places his plot had been left to take care of itself, how many points of his rough scenario required to be decided before progress could be made, how often he had omitted to account for things already determined.

Now for the first time in his life he realised the maddening constriction of a stage's four walls, the infuriating frequency with which the playwright's characters can be

discovered to be in some place quite other than the place where they are wanted.

He sweated and swore and trod about the room, sometimes stopping to eat a banana or to drink beer (it was at his particular request that Orde had provided these aids to thought). And he smoked for ever. His hair after a little time stood up all over his head, pushed aloft by his fevered hands. He took off his coat and he pulled off his collar. Orde, silently watching him, thought he had never seen a more blackguardly-looking bounder.

Michael had yet to learn all his stage craft. For his attempt to draft a scenario the unfortunate fellow was equipped with nothing but enthusiasm, a story, and a fertile brain. These three things are all very well in their way, but they count as nothing, when it comes to tackling a scenario, beside a very small practical experience of construction. Michael imagined that he was going to draw his plot out of his head like cotton off a reel ; instead, he found himself in the position of one who should try to play cats' cradle with bird-limed string. He got his scenario all over himself, and at the end of an hour he had to sit down and take a rest.

"This," he said, "is the devil and all."

"Yes," said Orde unsympathetically ; "it's a job that wants knowing. But don't stop. You're doing beautifully."

"I'm making an ass of myself," said Michael. "I'm trying to do too much at once. We"—Orde noted the plural pronoun with satisfaction—"must go slower, old boy."

"Yes," said Orde, "I remember when I wrote my play with Chalkley I had just the same trouble. You want to get the broad lines of your plot and work down to the detail."

Michael seized a banana and jumped up. "Right!" he said, stripping off the skin and flinging it into the grate, where, to the annoyance of his host's tidy soul, many other skins already lay. "Let's begin again and not bother about the order of the scenes and numbers for the present."

"Fire away," said Orde.

Michael dictated through two cigarettes. Then he said : " Now let's hear what you've got."

" This play," Orde read, " is about a revolution supposed to be going to take place in Capri. The whole thing is a hoax, worked by the lad Gisco (second comedian) and his gang of boy desperadoes. They have conceived the idea of terrorising their native town by the dissemination of hand-bills through the letter-boxes of the citizens and the posting of placards upon the walls of the houses, calling upon the people to rise and place their rightful princess on the throne, and warning them that the revolution is about to take place at once. The people of Capri, who are perfectly contented with the rule of their prince, and do not want any princess, rightful or otherwise, are exceedingly alarmed at the prospect of the trouble which is coming upon them, and none more so than Giovanni (principal comedian), the supposed father of Claudina, the girl whom Gisco proposes to raise to the throne. This Giovanni is the chief of police, and so primarily responsible to his lord and master for the maintenance of order in the island ; he is terrified at the idea of losing his job if anything of the kind should happen. More particularly so because Lorenzo, the Prince of Capri, who is an absentee landlord living in Naples (song for him upon the advantages of absenteeism), is expected to arrive immediately in the island for his annual visit of inspection. Giovanni is a tool of Lorenzo's, who is a usurper. Eighteen years ago Lorenzo stirred up the island against their ruling sovereign, drove him into exile, and collared his throne. The exiled prince had a daughter, Claudina, who fell into the hands of his supplanter, who, being a kind-hearted man, in spite of his political scoundrelism, spared her life and gave her into the care of Giovanni and his wife Gilda to bring up as their daughter, together with a casket containing the papers of identification usual in such circumstances. Giovanni's instructions were that in case Lorenzo and his son Adolpho, then a boy, should die, Claudina was to be declared rightful Princess of Capri ; but if they should live, all mention of her real birth was to be suppressed. Lorenzo is a true comic opera prince, and much may be made of the struggle, which he perpetually suffers from, between his political

aspirations and his tender conscience. Adolpho grows up to be a man, and his father tells him that he has arranged a brilliant match for him. Lorenzo's intention is to marry his son to the daughter of his predecessor and thus unite the dynasties. Adolpho, not at all wanting to be married, runs away from Naples, disguises himself and enters the service of a Capri fisherman whom he meets in the harbour. This brings him to Capri, an island which he adores, hating Naples. Here, of course, he sees and falls in love with Claudina, and in order to be near her renounces the sea and becomes a waiter in the restaurant kept in the public square by Giovanni's second wife, Gilda.

"Of course the boy Gisco, who is the son of Giovanni and Gilda, has no notion that Claudina is anything but his step-sister, and his absurd manifestoes calling upon Capri to rise and set her on the throne are prompted by nothing but his great affection for her and his boyish desire to make his fellow citizens' flesh creep. Gilda is the only person who knows whether Claudina or Rosella, her own daughter is the child of the deposed prince. She has mixed them up for her own purposes." Orde stopped.

"Gosh!" said Michael, "have I done no more than that?"

"That's all," Orde told him.

"Well, it's more or less intelligible, at any rate. I say, Orde, it's not so dusty, this idea of mine, is it? And those boy-brigands, Tiny Tontinelli, the Fiend of the Sierra, Flea Frederico, the Terror of the Seas, and so forth—they'll make rather a comical band of brigandlets, don't you think? Can't you see them advancing, finger on lip, from every quarter of the stage in their fancy pirate costumes, and singing?"

He sat to the piano and began the Boy Brigands' entrance number, la-la-ing it in the absence of the words which Orde was to write.

"And then, you know, Claudina appears at an upper window of Giovanni's house and sings;" and he proceeded again to la-la.

"Then there's the concerted bit for the boys and Claudina, with some good business that we must think out. It'll be great."

"We've had brigands before, once or twice," said Orde.

He was ready to accept Michael's plot for the sake of Michael's music, but he had no very high opinion of it. And he enjoyed stimulating Hoffman to defend the complete originality of his well-worn story.

"Not *boy*-brigands," Michael cried, getting up and beginning to walk about again. "That's new, absolutely, so far as I know. Of course they may have had them, but I haven't seen 'em. It might be a good idea to reform them just before the last curtain and march them in as boy scouts. However, that's for later on. Now I'll give you some more."

On that first evening Michael did manage to rough out his ideas into some sort of shape. This he left with Orde, and Orde in a couple of days succeeded in preparing the beginning of a scenario. Michael was enchanted with it. Orde had done just as he had been told, and had not made a single attempt to put in anything of his own. Michael had been afraid that this more experienced playwright would have felt it his duty to help—that is to say, hinder (for Michael was resolved to have his play as he had imagined it, and not otherwise), and any movement by Orde in the direction of change must have provoked a battle. For though Michael thought so contemptuously of the librettist's province, he laboured under the mistaken belief that for this particular play of his he had hit upon a very clever and original idea indeed. A few points were, perhaps, not entirely new—that he admitted to himself; but most of the thing was as fresh as it could be. That little matter of the boy-brigands alone was enough to make the book of an ordinary comic opera, and the Blue Grotto scene would be something to set London gasping. This child of his fancy, quite a commonplace little comic opera plot for Orde and everybody else, appeared to Michael to be possessed of originality and humour to an almost incredible degree.

It cost them a fortnight to write a scenario that so much as began to satisfy Michael.

III

During the first month of the collaboration Michael saw nothing of Linda.

Having the inventions of two years to put on paper the man was furiously at work. Till this moment the drudgery inseparable from musical composition had never succeeded in pleasing Michael. Not that he had ever shirked it. None of the publishers who employed him has ever been known to pay sixpence to a man who has been careful of sweating his brain ; and the fact of their dealing with Michael is in itself a perfect testimonial to his competence. But he had never pretended to like writing legible music. Commonly he used a kind of shorthand meaning less than nothing to anybody but himself, and he could work in this, with a pencil and a notebook, happily enough, for hours when a piano was not near, producing page after page of tangled dots and scratches which sang to him with as clear a voice as that of the most finished piece of printing. It was with a piano, however, that he was really happy. He thought the ear an incomparably better organ of hearing than the eye.

With Michael the great period was from conception until all the real difficulties of a thing were surmounted. From that point his interest in a piece of work diminished steadily ; for he was not of the first order. Yet if he could not rejoice to carry a thing right through, he was too good a man to scamp what he set out to finish. Simply, he found the polishing process dull. As for fair copying, he abhorred it. The matter by that time was settled for good or ill so far as he was concerned, and the shaping of it for the eyes of other people was just so much waste of work.

For Michael, then, the task which now lay before him would have been an impossible one but for the fact that he had the definite offer of Orde to produce his play. Not without this could he have forced himself to the setting

down, in such a manner that they should be read, of the airs and concerted pieces which had been hidden in his brain for so many months. Not for his own delight could he have written out the music of "The Conspiracy at Capri." But for Orde's proposal, or somebody else's of the same nature, Michael would have been content, for the rest of his life, with his invention and, occasionally, with the playing of those same tunes, and with the invention of others ; and by the time it came for him to die many operettas in the rough would have lain silent behind his forehead, or inarticulate in a shelf of scrawled note-books. It is quite certain that he would never have given himself the trouble to put them properly on paper.

It is not my intention to pose Michael before you as a giant of music : he was nothing of the kind, and none knew this better than himself. The illusion of a destiny upon which a world should breathlessly attend had already departed from him ; he perceived himself clearly to be nothing more extraordinary than a thoroughly competent musician with a generous gift of pleasing melody. Of all humanity, he knew, only himself would be much worse off though his tunes should never be heard ; yet his indifference to the ultimate effect of his music did not blind him to the immediate importance to himself of its production. Though his success should do nothing whatever for the world, it would do an unimaginable deal for Michael Hoffman. It would enable him, among other things, to marry Linda and keep her in luxury. It would also provide him with full opportunity for expressing himself in his own way. And let his own way be small or great, it is the only way and the only thing which vitally concerns the artist.

And now—behold ! a miracle—Michael fair-copying with enthusiasm ; Michael industriously working out his harmonies on paper ; Michael, with his tongue out like a schoolboy, shaping crotchets and quavers till three in the morning.

The Chance had come, his Chance, and he knew himself fit to seize it. No man can ask any better thing of Fortune. Michael didn't. He simply hurled himself upon the good gift.

He wrote all through that month in a sort of frenzy, "getting it down," late at night and far into the dawn, in trains and trams and publishers' offices and pupils' drawing-rooms ; yes, and at street corners, while he waited for omnibuses. He was getting it down. He was seizing his Chance. He was up to his job, ripe, master of his trade. For this he had been preparing himself eight long years. It would be a pity if he couldn't give himself a little trouble now. Every time he brought Orde a completed, clearly written number, he felt that he had driven in one more hook by which he should retain his hold upon Opportunity.

You are not to suppose that his clients were neglected. His pupils found him, if anything, more particular and alert than before ; as for his publishers, they were delighted with him, the good men. Never had they employed a more diligent, punctual, and in every way satisfactory person. The truth is the fellow was, at this time, inspired by his situation, and all power to be slack was out of him. The fierce eagerness with which he laboured at his own business he carried on into the affairs of other people. He hated too sincerely this outside trade to do anything with it but his very best ; for the harder he wrought the sooner he could leave it and get back to his own work. And because at bottom he was a very practical fellow he understood the folly of risking a livelihood for the sake of any theatrical enterprise whatever—even one which should enjoy the advantage of being performed to his music. Knowing some little of London and its stage, he put the odds against the success of "The Conspiracy at Capri" at about ten thousand to one ; yet none the less did he labour to provide Orde with fair copy. His Chance was come.

At this time he was wise enough to deny himself the relaxing luxury of fresh invention ; singly he held before his eyes the perfection of the music which he already had—the "getting of it down." Concerning that which was to come he had no misgivings ; he was absolutely confident that when it should be wanted it would appear. It says a great deal for his strength of mind that he could quite renounce new composition, for he was perpetually tempted.

He was helped by two things : first, that sure knowledge of resource which is in every walk of life the reward of hard work ; and secondly, I think, by this very temptation to invent which so often assailed him. He was blissfully aware through all those grinding days of a copious spring of gay melody that waited somewhere to be tapped ; and by every arid sheet of music-paper that he filled and laid aside he seemed to draw one step nearer to the moment when he should suddenly wallow in tunes of unexampled freshness. The stuff that he was putting down was good—he knew it—but that which he should soon let loose—well, that was immense. *Immense !*

The society of Linda he forswore entirely. He wanted so much of it that he would not have a very little. All the time that he could spare from making a living and working out his music he gave to Bertram Orde. He counted it well spent if it brought him Linda. For the sake of that possibility he was content to deny his eyes the present sight of her. But he sent her a daily postcard.

He posted it always in time to greet her at her flat when she got home in the evening.

IV

So long as Orde did what he was told he was fairly satisfactory. Nobody, nowadays, expects the librettist of a musical play to be a Molière. Orde's stuff was passable, and Michael asked nothing more than this of his collaborator, except, of course, his money.

It was only if Orde should begin to think for himself that he would become troublesome. During this first month of their connection Orde showed very little disposition to do anything of the kind ; for the present he

permitted himself to be wholly dominated by Michael. The musician's enthusiasm and his familiarity with the unwritten play easily overrode Orde's every suggestion. And Orde was too fully convinced of the worth of the music which was being brought to him to force anything like an issue. He wanted that music.

But he bided his time. The contract was not yet signed.

We have seen that Orde was proud to suppose and to declare himself devoid of business ability: yet we have also seen that in this respect, as perhaps in others, he was not as pure an artist as he desired to be thought. The matter of his contract with Hoffman affords us another example of the difficulty under which the poor soul laboured when he endeavoured to purge his nature of those contemptible commercial things, forethought and caution.

He insisted on having their contract prepared by his solicitors, as much, he pointed out to Michael, for Michael's sake as for his own. Only a properly-drawn contract, he submitted, was any good at all. If they began to try to make one for themselves they would land themselves in no end of difficulties. It was far better that a solicitor should do it. As to the cost of the document, that need not concern Hoffman at all. He, Orde, would look after all that. His, Orde's, solicitor would do the job for them at once, and then they could go ahead, confident that everything was properly arranged for.

Michael was quite pleased. His sole concern was to get his music produced. He left all the rest to Orde. It was understood that Orde was to assume the sole responsibility, that the two of them were to divide the royalties equally, and that Orde was to take the balance of the plunder. So long as all that was in the contract Michael didn't care what else was in it. Certainly it was much better to have the thing drawn up ship-shape by a solicitor, and by all means let it be Orde's solicitor. He left all that to Orde. For the rest—he, Michael, was busy.

Orde proceeded to "leave it all" to his solicitor, but he was not ignorant that that professional would make the interests of his own client his first consideration while preparing the document. And if he should at all fail in

this respect Orde would not be the man to shrink from pointing the fact out to him.

And though he had told Michael that the contract should be got ready at once, he did not think it necessary to be very urgent with his lawyer. No doubt he comprehended that hurried work is apt to be unsatisfactory. For the moment, at any rate, he sang small and let Michael wade in deeper and deeper. Until the contract was signed Orde took all that Michael gave him, whether of music or of suggestions for his own department, or indeed of violent opposition to his own ideas for the improvement of their joint work. Orde had cold blood, and the heat of Michael's never affected it.

v

Michael would listen with ill-concealed impatience to the scene, verses, or what-not which Orde had prepared. The actual words of this play seemed to him so very unimportant. No words, no play, of course ; but really almost any words would do. Words were things to alter at rehearsal, things to cut out by the bushel to give the comedian room for his gags. It was the music that counted. The music and the dresses and the funny man—these made the success of every musical play. Often, as he listened to Orde's lines, he asked himself why he hadn't written them himself ; it seemed as if anybody could have written those lines, so ordinary they were. He could not understand how it was that Orde seemed so pleased with them. Surely to goodness *he* could have done as well as this. Then he would remember the money of Orde and groan in his soul.

Orde's contribution finished and praised—Michael never had anything but praise for Orde unless there had been

tampering with the plot, which he would not allow—the musician would get quickly to the piano and begin to play what he had brought. At these times Orde used to sit hugging himself. What Hoffman had shown him that first afternoon was just the dry bones of this. It was great comic opera.

Only one fault did he have to find with it. He feared it was going to be too hard for the artists. The voices that were to sing "Hoffman" would cost a pretty penny. Sometimes he murmured something of this kind, but Michael would have none of it.

"No, Orde," he would say, smiting the piano. "That's where everybody makes their mistake. What we want is difficult music. I'm tired of this story that you can't get women in London to sing anything harder than Yankee-doodle. You can get anything in London if you pay for it. Of course it's your money, old man; I know that; and if you insist on the ordinary kind of fa-la-la chorus you must have it and I must simplify my stuff. But you'll be wrong if you do. Nowadays you've got to give them something new, and there's nothing newer to London than good singing in this sort of show. It's so new that they've never even thought of hearing it. What we want in this play of ours is a chorus and principals—but chiefly a chorus—that'll paralyse 'em from the ringing up. Remember, this is a *musical* play, not a string of beanfeaster's ditties, and it's music that's wanted to-day. They're fed up with Ring-a-ring-a-roses and Rag-time. If you'll provide the voices I'll provide the songs for 'em, and instead of a damning with faint praise you'll get two columns in every morning paper. We've got to make 'em sit up. Plot won't do it, that's sure. Dialogue won't do it. Imagine Gilbert set by some of these rotters. Dresses and scenery and pretty faces won't do it. They've had all that since the year one. Legs won't do it. The comic merchant won't do it. No comic ever yet pulled a play out of the mud. Well, what's left? Eh? What's left, Orde? The music and the way it's done. That's the answer."

Then Orde would finger his moustache and smile a little nervously, and say: "I believe you're right, old boy," and wonder at the conceit of the musical. Thereupon Michael

would hit the piano again and cry : " Of course I'm right, my good chap," and so on.

At these times Orde detested Michael and wished that he had seen the fellow damned before he ever consented to work with him. Then Michael would play something else, and Orde would be glad and remember, comfortably, that it was his solicitors who were preparing the contract.

CHAPTER XII

I

LINDA, though she ached for a sight of Michael and for the sound of his voice, knew better than to worry him to come to her. Her common sense told her that men must work though women weep, and her love made a glory for her out of the subordination of her own needs to her man's welfare. Michael had got his Chance. Of all things, her want of him must the least be allowed to spoil it. The postcard which every evening awaited her return to her flat was a poor substitute for Michael, but it made the difference in her life between misery and happiness. These messages were of the slightest : "Going strong," "Scenario done," "How are you?" "My best insults to the Anglo-Saxon Fictioneer." But the small daily message gave Linda assurance of more than the progress of the work or the worker's desire to know how she did. As sharp-witted people are said to read between the lines of a letter sentiments which the sender has been particularly careful not to express, so Linda read, between postcards, a whole history of patient, strong effort, with herself for its object. Michael's communications were brief to the point of neglect ; they came every day, and this made of them a wooing.

Every night she sent a like reply, a word or two on a postcard, and often she took a couple of hours to write them. She had the time to spare.

On her way home from Bayswater she used to linger in front of the stationers' windows, searching the rows of picture-cards for something that should amuse him. They were for the most part very vulgar, but now and then a

really comical design would catch her eye, and she would dart into the shop and emerge happy, because she had found a picture that might make him laugh. There was one series which she bought, six of them, and sent to him one by one. It was called "Out of the Limelight," and depicted, with admirable spirit and grotesqueness, celebrities as they may be supposed to appear at home when the blaze of publicity is for a moment removed from them. An author was eating a vast onion, and by his side was a book labelled, "'Caviar,' by ME." An explorer was on his sideboard reaching vainly for a bell-rope ; on the table, at its ease, a mouse ate his luncheon ; on the floor was a heap of manuscript, the top leaf of which exhibited the chapter-heading, "How I killed Ten Elephants in One Morning." The others were in the same vein of broad comedy. These Linda sent to Michael inscribed, "Lions from the Den of Psyche."

She spent nearly all her spare time in her flat. The Fiesoli no longer held out any attractions to her, for, lunching as she did copiously every day at Pontefract Terrace on wholesome fare, she had, or persuaded herself that she had, no need of a meat meal at night. The Fiesoli's macaroni was cheap and satisfying, but not so cheap as bread and butter and cocoa prepared in her own kitchen—and not much more satisfying. Linda was saving money hand over fist, and every week she saw her burden of debt nearer removal. She had a fancy to pay it off all at once, to get that business done at one time ; not to scatter it over weeks of small repayments. It was between herself and Michael, and the less it raised its head the better. With her first bit of salary she had opened a savings-bank account, and this gave her a most gratifying sensation of stability.

On Saturday, pay-day, she hurried to her local post-office to deposit the precious stuff, reserving for her own uses during the coming week only the absolutely necessary sum. And her appetite for economy grew with her bank-balance. She husbanded her butter, often eating three dry slices of bread before indulging the desire of her body for fatty food. The dry bread she dipped in the cocoa. She suppressed milk in her tea altogether in the third week,

and tried to do without sugar, but this last triumph she never attained ; and cocoa without milk was altogether too odious. These sacrifices were reflected delightfully in the little depositor's book, which she knew by heart. She abandoned the omnibuses, and took to walking to and from her work, which was very good for her. It meant getting home later, but as she had no Michael to meet at The Fiesoli, this was of no consequence. Thus she saved fourpence a day, and spent a penny of it on a picture-postcard and a halfpenny on a stamp ; she was twopence halfpenny to the good each night. She obeyed the necessity of buying a new pair of boots ; it was like parting with her blood. She had no need of coals in this summer weather, and little of light. Her evening meal eaten, she would sit long in the dusk pondering her day's message, burn a candle for a minute when, at last, she wrote it, run to the post and back, and then go straight to bed. Going to bed is, of course, the very best way of saving light, and as sleeping is an economy in the matter of breakfast she lay long abed on Sundays, drowsing. As these Sundays were desperately dull, it was an economy of dulness, too.

Her honourable avarice frequently suggested to her that she should sell these Sundays of hers to Mr. Whittaker. That indefatigable student of Anglo-Saxon Fiction was perfectly ready to accept them. He never pressed the matter. He had told her once that she could earn overtime money on Sunday, and he was not the man to urge it. But when on Saturday evening (she yielded her Saturday afternoons) he paid her, the slightly questioning voice in which he said, "Till Monday then, Miss Brook," told her that she had only to propose the morrow for him to accept joyfully. But she always suppressed herself. One day's rest in the week her eyes and voice must have. Money and luncheon were good, but health was better. Boredom was bad, but ruined eyes were worse. What Mr. Whittaker did on Sundays she never asked herself ; nor did she care. She could not love Mr. Whittaker at all.

On Sundays, therefore, she stayed in bed, sleeping, saving bread and butter, saving her eyes. Linda was blessed with a great capacity for sleep. This was fortunate,

because the Sunday night presented no terrors of wakefulness to her. The condition of her bank-book contributed, no doubt.

On Sundays also the neglected Fiesoli saw her come in for an evening meal of macaroni, and bread at discretion. She ate much bread.

II

During this period Linda continued to devote her mornings entirely to Mayne Reid. Her afternoons, owing to the method of her employer's madness, were more varied. Between three and half-past six she might have anybody between her hands. One of her duties was to fill up orders on the circulating library to which Mr. Whittaker subscribed (he was not insane enough to buy his "current fiction"), and there was always a large supply of novels hot from the publisher's. Some were very good and some were very bad, but Linda had to read every word of them all. Mr. Whittaker's eyes, apparently, permitted him at night to skim the reviews in the newspapers and magazines which poured into the house, and thus he was able to exercise some kind of discrimination in his choice. But once he had decided to hear a book, hear it he did, all of it, every syllable. I suppose he would have thought himself neglectful of his duty to posterity had he, upon less evidence, judged any work and given it its place in Anglo-Saxon Fiction.

But the mornings were still Mayne Reid's.

"The Headless Horseman" must have been one of the first of the great romancer's tales which the student had attacked. The series, at any rate, seemed interminable. After "The Scalp Hunters," "The Rifle Rangers," and

then "The Half-Blood" and "Lost Lenore" and "The Quadroon," and yet others, engaged Mr. Whittaker's critical attention. Linda read on, earning her money and marvelling at her employer. Presently—for custom can stale any novelty—she ceased to marvel. Mayne Reid became as much part of Linda's daily life as the walk to Pontefract Terrace. She no longer worried herself over the waste of time. She accepted her employment without troubling about its utility, just as, no doubt, a printer does. If this extraordinary Mr. Whittaker thought it necessary to his life's work to swallow Mayne Reid, bones and beak and all, who was she to concern herself about it? Mr. Whittaker was a rich man; he had obviously nothing to do, and he chose to do this. If one began to question the utility of swallowing Mayne Reid one must do the same by the preparation of a monumental work upon Anglo-Saxon Fiction. Linda had no doubt at all that Mr. Whittaker's book would prove, if it should ever get itself written, a singularly unilluminating work. The man was essentially stupid. Sometimes, when a book came to an end, he would dictate to her a few lines recording his impressions. Shorthand was quite unnecessary at these times, for the words came very slowly. Mr. Whittaker laboured under a great lack of ease in composition, and there were frequent corrections to be made. He was hard to please even over the summary of a book of adventure for boys. His task oppressed him with a strong sense of its sacredness. But, though they were born hardly, Mr. Whittaker's opinions were no more weighty for the length of their conception. They were of no importance whatever.

Touching "The Scalp Hunters," for instance, he made the following inestimable observations. "'The Scalp Hunters.' This is a capital book. Lively, vigorous, bearing the reader along breathlessly. Marred, however (as is 'The Headless Horseman'), by a reckless abuse of strong language, hardly suitable in a work of art, which, indeed, may suggest such things but should be careful, here particularly, of over-realism. The plot is not complicated, but where adventure is the principal interest plot is of secondary importance. The characters of Seguin

the Scalp Hunter and Rube the Trapper stand out forcibly from a background of lesser creations.’’

This took him an incredible time to produce, and the page from which Linda transcribed the fair copy for filing, in Mr. Whittaker's big case of pigeon-holes, looked like a nightmare, so crossed out and written in and carried into the margin, and generally massacred, was the original message.

Linda at last gave up wondering if Mr. Whittaker would ever hear enough of Mayne Reid to enable him to form a judgment before the last word of the last book should have been pronounced. Then, indeed, she anticipated an interesting struggle between the poverty of his critical faculty and the exuberance of his knowledge. The final summing up of Mayne Reid must surely prove tremendous. But it still seemed far distant.

To Mr. Whittaker Linda remained a machine.

He strained his humanity to the extent of wishing her a formal “Good-morning” and a formal “Good-night.” During working hours he seemed to recognise the flesh and blood in her only by providing her with a bottle of water and a tumbler. He had no praise for the improvement which she herself noticed in her reading. The continuance of her employment alone indicated that he derived any satisfaction from her efforts. Nor, it must be said, did he find fault. After her first morning Linda was always careful to appear on the stroke of the three o'clock gong, so he had no occasion to blame her unpunctuality.

“We will rest now,” was his formula at one o'clock and at five, when tea came in; and at half-past six, “Till to-morrow, then, Miss Brook.” Then there were the occasional dictated criticisms, followed by the name of the book which was to be read. At all other times the portly man lay silent on his couch, quite still, save for an occasional crossing of the feet under the green rug. During the tea interval he never spoke, sipping one cup of tea which the butler, Anthony, prepared for him. This was the most trying part of the day for Linda. On Saturday evenings Mr. Whittaker had her money ready for her, a sovereign and a ten-shilling piece, and seven shillings and sixpence

in silver, always the same. He gave it to her in an envelope.

By-and-by she ceased to trouble herself about him. She grew to regard him as he regarded her, as a machine, a listening machine, just as she was a talking one. His enormous silence ceased to irritate her; she came to disregard it. This was not a man that was on the sofa; Mr. Whittaker became part of his own couch. She no longer thought of long pins in connection with her employer. The desire to see him leap suddenly into active life, to hear him swear violently, departed from her.

Once in the street, she forgot all about Mr. Whittaker. When Psyche talked of her father, Linda changed the subject; her curiosity had become aversion. She did not want so much as to hear his name. She did not want even to be reminded that she was free from him.

Yet, in spite of his proximity, she enjoyed her days, especially—she delighted in her Mayne Reid—her mornings. After her first amazement that she should be reading this author at all had passed, she had quickly succumbed to that power which, in a story-teller, triumphs at its ease over a sloppy style and a melodramatic taste in character and situation. Mayne Reid made her want to go on, and on she went, Mr. Whittaker paying her thirty-seven shillings and sixpence a week the while.

Often the clock would strike, and the level voice would say from the couch: "We will rest now." Linda would be surprised to find herself there in the study, dragged away suddenly and inexorably many thousands of miles from a breathless participation in some desperate business near the Mexican border. Sometimes, less absorbed, she used to race the clock for the end of an incident. Sometimes, stealing a look ahead, she would learn from some lurid picture that a crisis was awaiting her, and then, if the clock was dangerous, perhaps she would slacken the pace, drink water, cough and otherwise retard the progress, if perchance she might thereby postpone those exciting pages until she could be certain of not being interrupted.

On the whole she enjoyed her life, as far as she could

enjoy it without Michael. And Michael was taking his Chance.

III

For all her flightiness Psyche had a certain tenacity of purpose. Having proposed to herself—Heaven knows how the idea had ever entered her head—the establishment of a salon, she stuck to the notion. In her talks with Linda she was always hammering away at it. Of her resolve to go on the stage she no longer spoke, but Linda was not surprised. Behind it there had been, Linda supposed, a good deal more bravado than intention. After all, Psyche had no particular motive for being an actress except to escape from her home; and she was clearly conscious of the many advantages which her position in her father's house afforded her. The child had a catlike hatred of discomfort and hard work which must keep her all her days a dabbler. Boredom could alone drive her away from Pontefract Terrace.

Linda encouraged the salon plan strongly. She dreaded what might happen if this feather should embark itself upon the stream of real life. A salon was the very thing for Psyche. It would free her from the necessity of leaving home by giving her that impression of being an artist among artists which her vain little soul craved. In return for her hospitality they would say pretty things about her sketches and dances and what-not.

Linda had no doubt of Psyche's ability to collect once a week in her den a number of more or less brilliant persons. Any woman who deliberately sets out to know clever folk can do it if she is only a little vivacious and has enough money to give them good things to eat and drink, though,

to be a real success, she must get a man to buy her tobacco for her.

Linda only hoped that the salon might speedily be established. The sooner it did so the less chance there was of Psyche's breaking out in some positively disastrous fashion. Linda was, therefore, anxious to introduce Michael to "the den" as quickly as possible. Had she been inclined to be careless of her promise, Psyche would not have allowed it. The future Madame Récamier of Bayswater had no intention of letting this real musician slip through her fingers. She built enormously on Michael. Linda had told her that he should be produced at the earliest possible moment, and Psyche, impatient of every slightest restraint or delay, fretted sadly while she waited until the much-desired Hoffman should find a breathing-space among his labours. Evidently the knowledge that he was writing a comic opera, which was soon to be produced, had profoundly impressed her.

Indeed, Michael's play threatened to supplant herself in her affections as a topic of conversation. She could hardly be drawn into the discussion of anything but Michael, and his music and the progress of the play. Linda was delighted to oblige her, and made up for her slight knowledge of Michael's doings by the fulness with which she served up other information relating to him ; and of course she had plenty to tell. But on the point of bringing him to see Psyche she was firm ; it couldn't be done until he should be more free than he was at present.

"But, hang it all ! " Psyche cried one day, " surely he can spare me *one* evening. He can't be working *all* the time. He must give himself a bit off now and then."

"He doesn't," said Linda.

"He can't be much of a composer, I should think," said the other pettishly, "if he goes on all the time that way ; it's like a machine. If he was a real artist he'd have to stop for inspiration now and then. Why, I could no more sit down and paint or write or dance, unless I felt like it, than I could stop myself from work when the mood arrives."

"It's a matter of temperament, I expect," said Linda. "Besides, just now he's writing out music that he's

composed already. He told me it would take him a month's solid work. Until he gets it done *I* don't expect to see him, at any rate."

"Well, it's very tiresome. Don't you think he'd take a night off if you told him how much *I* wanted to meet him? If he's poor he can't go to many decent houses, I should think. If you told him there'd be champagne, Linda!"

"I don't think champagne would bring him," said Linda. "Beer and bananas are more like it. That's what he works on, you know."

"Is it? How interesting! That's what *I like*. That's the artist in him. I say, I'll have a barrel of Bass in and as many bananas as he can eat. If you let him know that—"

"My dear child, he's working, I tell you."

"Don't you 'dear child' me, granny! I know what it is. You don't want to bring him. You could if you would, but you won't. It's beastly mean of you, Linda, that's what it is." Her mouth drooped just as if she were going to cry. "You want to keep him to yourself," she said.

"Stuff!" said Linda. "I can't drag the man here by the neck. You shall have your musician in time. Don't be afraid. I've promised to bring him, and he's promised to come, and he will—as soon as he can."

"What worries me," said Psyche, "is, that he mayn't come until his play's been produced and he's famous already. That's no good to me. I want to get hold of them while they're unknown. That's the proper kind of salon to run. Celebrities are all right and one can't get along without them, but what I want is to hear one of my guests say: 'Who's that young chap over there with the red hair?' and another one say: 'I dunno, but he'll be somebody some day, or else what's he *here* for?' I want my salon to be the ante-room to Fame. Do you tumble the notion? That's why I want this Hoffman of yours at once. He's to be My First Success."

"And if he isn't?" Linda asked, not because she doubted Michael, but because she was curious about Psyche's reply.

Psyche leaned across the table and patted Linda's hand.

"Oh," said Psyche, "in that case there are others, aren't there? I'll just have to begin again. But you see why I want him at once, don't you?"

IV

That first month was at an end before the longing hostess had a word of hope. The day was a Saturday.

It was late in the luncheon before Linda, who could no longer keep it in, said: "Michael's finished that music."

"What?" Psyche shrieked. "The opera?"

"Goodness, no! The music he had in his head. He'll be finished with it to-day, he says, and he's going to take a rest. He's tired out."

"Then you'll bring him along here soon."

"Yes, I hope so."

"If he's so tired," said Psyche thoughtfully, "I suppose you won't see him this evening?"

"Well, of course I shall," cried Linda indignantly. "We're dining together."

"Then bring him along after dinner."

Linda, annoyed by her own lack of foresight, vented her irritation on Psyche.

"My dear Psyche," she said, "I've not seen him for a month. I'm really afraid you'll have to wait a little longer." Then she felt remorse. "You don't think me very selfish, do you?" she asked.

Psyche laughed. "Not I," she said. "I expect if I had a friend," she added, becoming suddenly pathetic, "I shouldn't be in a hurry to share him with anyone else."

"You see," said Linda, "we shall have such a lot to say to one another, won't we? But I'll arrange an evening for him to come here, I promise you."

"Dear old Linda," she said, "you shall have him to yourself this evening. You must have missed him horribly all this month."

"Well," Linda admitted, "I have."

She was silent; so was Psyche for a few moments, which she employed in considering Linda and reflectively chewing a piece of an *éclair*. At last she said:

"Don't think I'm going to worry you to bring him here to-night; but if you only would, it'd be so much more comfortable for you than a restaurant. I hate talking in public places myself."

Linda smiled. "Oh," she said easily, "don't trouble yourself about us. We'll be comfortable enough in the flat, thanks." She was only concerned at the moment to make Psyche understand that there was no chance of getting Michael to the den that evening.

Psyche's eyes widened, but she said nothing for a while.

"Try to make it next week, Linda, won't you?" she said presently. "Say Monday or Tuesday. If he's taking a rest, now's the time to nail him, isn't it?"

"Oh," said Linda. "I'll do my best for you. Don't be afraid."

Psyche again was silent. Then she offered Linda another *éclair*, which Linda accepted.

"Linda," said Psyche then, "what's it like living in a flat?"

As this was the first time that she had ever shown the smallest interest in Linda's way of life, Linda was pleased.

"Oh," she said, "it's well enough, but a bit lonely, of course."

"Then you *do* live alone?"

"Yes, all alone."

"Golly! That must be awful at nights. Is it a decent place? Small, eh? You never could afford a big flat with what the father gives you. How many rooms? Six? Seven?"

"Two," said Linda.

"Hully gee!" screamed Psyche. "Two! You live in two rooms! But what about the bath?"

"There isn't a bath. I tub in the kitchen. I dine there, too."

"You dine with the servants?"

"I haven't got any servants. There's a char comes in."

"No servants!" Psyche cried. "Then who brings you tea in the morning?"

"I go without it."

Psyche was too astonished to make any comment. She sat with her chin in her hands for a long time, staring big-eyed at Linda, without saying a word. Then "Lord!" she exclaimed. "I'd forgotten. I say," she went on without explaining what it was that she had forgotten, "that's pretty jolly awful what you've just told me, Linda. You poor old dear thing. I say, you must be frightfully uncomfy, aren't you?"

"Not I," said Linda.

"I say," Psyche went on, "I'd no notion such pigstys were allowed. Where is this awful little place?"

"Adelaide Buildings," said Linda.

"Where the deuce is that?"

Linda told her where Adelaide Buildings was.

"I say," Psyche exclaimed. "I must see this for myself some day. See how the poor live, you know. Would you give a body tea some Sunday when Mr. Hoffman's busy again?"

"Surely," said Linda.

Indeed, she would be very glad to do this. Psyche would have been a welcome sight at Adelaide Buildings on any of the past four Sundays.

"Gee!" said Psyche. "I must see that. Two rooms and no bath! What's the number?"

"Seventy-four. It's the fifth floor, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I don't care how high it is. The higher the better. Aunt Rose lives right at the top of Queen Anne's Mansions. My! what a view she has! Clear to France, I should think. You get much view, Linda? Yes, if I lived in a flat, I'd be right up as high as I could get. So long as the lift works——"

"You know, there isn't any lift at my flat," Linda interrupted.

"There isn't? Well, never mind. I can only die once,

You won't frighten me, anyhow. I mean to come. I'll come to-morrow week, unless your Mr. Hoffman wants you then."

Linda, imagining that she was aware of the proximity of a powerful hint, turned the talk away from Michael and Adelaide Buildings by offering to toss Psyche for the last *éclair*. Psyche accepted, won the toss, and was so pleased that, apparently, she forgot all about Michael. Cramming the *éclair* into her mouth, she jumped up from the table and whirled Linda into the den to hear the latest rolls on the player-piano.

CHAPTER XIII

I

WHEN at last the five knocks (with the pause between the second and third) came on her door and Linda opened to Michael, the joy that she felt in seeing him was almost killed by the fright his appearance gave her. The month had taken a lot out of Michael. Linda was accustomed to him now as a thin man—the plumpness which had threatened him during those easy German years was hardly a memory—but she had never seen him haggard and white like this. She thought he looked ready to die. Love is a confounded scare-monger.

Michael was not in the least ill; he was only very tired, because, in order to keep faith with her, he had worked all through a hot night and a hotter day; and perhaps this was not the wisest way in the world to wind up four weeks of almost perpetual toil. Moreover, he had just run up from the street door. But because he leaned against the wall to recover his breath, Linda thought he was too weak to stand alone. She was seized with panic; yet, remembering the danger of showing alarm at the appearance of people who are in a critical state, she suppressed an exclamation of dismay and substituted one of delight.

“Joy!” she said, throwing the door wide. “Then you got through?”

He nodded, saving his wind, and handed her a folded newspaper. Round one of the paragraphs was a thick blue line. Linda read:

“The latest collaboration announces itself as between

Bertram Orde and Michael Hoffman. Those who are in the know predict an eye-opener for the devotees of the musical play. I only hope that the event may justify the prophecy, and that the eye-opener in question is not in store for these two admirable artists. But I fear that the taste of the public wants more than an eye-opener. It is a corpse-reviver that is required. Howsoever, all luck to Bert and Mike, and vogue *la galère* of the Light Opera Renascence.

"That's where money comes in," he said. "Arthur Craddock's going to work the press for us. I'll say this much for Orde, he don't mind spending. If he'll only go on as he's begun, be hanged if I don't think we stand a chance! 'Those two admirable artists' is pretty good, isn't it? They'll wonder why they've never heard of us. P'raps somebody'll write to ask who we are. P'raps Craddock will, and then tell himself the following week. There's the making of a whole correspondence in that line."

"I hate your play," she said, giving him his paper. "Can't you even say you're pleased to see me?"

He dropped the paper and took both her hands. "No," he said. "I can't." He left her to make what she pleased of this and went into the flat. His delight in getting her back was too acute for either expression or good manners. His voice told her what his words seemed to deny, and, picking up the paper from the floor, she followed him into the sitting-room, reading the paragraph again as she went. This was her first meeting with his name in print.

She found him seated on the window-sill, breathing deeply of the high, cool evening air, and staring at the sunset across the golden splendours of a million smoking chimneys.

"Orde don't know where to live," he said. "Think of calling Hyde Park a view. A lot of blessed trees. And you have this. Oh, Linda," he cried, stretching himself, "I like Adelaide Buildings better than Orde's place. Much better. I don't think I want ever to go back to Orde's place again. We've been at it since lunch, you know. He's a weary companion, but he gets his lyrics done.

He's a good boy. He gets his lyrics done. Orde's all right, and be blowed to him ! Now let's talk about something else ; dinner, for instance."

Linda pulled a bandbox from behind a curtain and took out a hat. Then she went to the mirror and began to stab rapidly at her head with long, dreadful pins ; excitement had given her a great appetite, and she was eager to be gone to The Fiesoli. On The Fiesoli she was resolved, because she knew that Michael would want to be extravagant.

" Proceed," she said. " Talk about dinner at once. I'm a glutton to-night, Michael, so mention all the most delicious foods you can think of while I get on this hat."

" First of all," said Michael, " it is understood that you're my guest."

Linda nodded.

" I propose," said Michael, " that we mark this occasion with a quite unprecedented banquet. The Café Royal suggests itself to me ; the grill-room, you know. I've not been there since we all came unstuck. Indulge me in this, Linda, like a dear woman. Just for once let me spend a whole sovereign on a dinner for two. It won't hurt me. Think how rich I must be just now. Why, for a month I've lived like a hermit ; a dashed busy one, though. What do you think of this ? We'll begin with *hors-d'œuvres*. A really wise man would make his dinner off the Café Royal's *hors-d'œuvres*, but as we're not wise, but out on the beano, we'll follow with the soles. We'll have 'em Colberted. Lamb cutlets, asparagus, a grilled chicken, pears Melba, and petits fours. How's that ? "

" Out ! " said Linda. " We dine at The Fiesoli."

" Oh," he cried in his greedy disappointment, " The Fiesoli be hanged ! We can eat spaghetti at any time. I say, I want to blow us right out to-night, Linda. It's my reward for being brave and sticking to my task."

" No good," she said firmly. " You shall give me that dinner out of your first royalties. To-night it's The Fiesoli and coffee up here and a long talk after."

" That's of course," he said. " But we can drive to Piccadilly Circus and back in no time. And you told me to think of delicious things to eat."

She shook her head. "Poor old Michael," she said. "Wouldn't they let him be extravagant, then?"

"No," he cried, "dashed if they will, confound them!" He got up. "Very good, you skinflint," he said. "Have it your own way. The Fiesoli it is, and The Fiesoli's macaroni. But for mercy's sake buck up. If I've got to eat stickphast to-night, lemme do it quick and get it over. And I had dreamed of Russian salad at the *Café Royal*."

II

They were back in the flat, stodged with spaghetti and steak and rhubarb tart. Linda had made the coffee and they were both at ease, she on the bed and he on the floor among cushions. They smoked and talked softly as becomes those who digest.

"Now," she said, "I've given you all my news. You know all about Mr. Whittaker and his daughter, and his reader, and his researches, and Anthony, and my new boots and everything. I'm tired of talking and seeing you eat. Now I'm going to rest and listen. Report. I've not been able to get a word out of you about the play. Report, Michael."

"You'll go to sleep."

"I shan't." Linda sat up indignantly. "Go on at once. How far have you got?"

"I? Oh! you *know*. I've finished the stuff I had in my head. It's about half the whole score."

"Are you satisfied with it?"

"Of course I am or I shouldn't be here. I mean, it'll do. It's not the greatest kind of music, but I'm not out to write that. It's nearly as good as Offenbach and as Italian as the devil. I don't want anything better at present. I should say there's about five winners in it,

and the rest will carry on all right. I say, I got a pretty good tune coming along here from Orde's." He fished in a pocket and produced one of those advertisement cards which are to be found in boxes in the carriages of the tube railways. Linda could see certain lines and marks upon it. "Here you are. It's a topical song for the first comic in Act II. That's going to be a great act, Act II. is. It's to be a fête in the Prince's Gardens, you know, celebrating his annual visit to Capri. Lord! what a back-cloth I'm going to have for that scene. It's a terrace, and behind is the whole view of the island which you get from Tiberius's Villa, the whole great theatre of red crags and vineyards. Evening effect later on with bonfires on the hills and strings of lights everywhere. If one could only work rockets on a back-cloth! However, I was telling you about this song for the comedian. It's about the short way Tiberius had with people whom he didn't fancy. You see, his villa was about 1,000 feet up on the edge of a precipice. You can drop a stone into the sea there. Tiberius used to put his antipathies out of the window, and he had no occasion to worry about them any more. You catch the idea of the song, don't you? Can't you see the comic man's little gesture sideways, with his two hands as he puts the subject of each verse out of Tiberius's window. Orde'll have to get a hump on himself when he writes that lyric. We shall want a good tag. What do you suggest?"

"I'm not suggesting," said Linda, "I'm listening. But it seems to me you give this man Orde too much, Michael—plot and music *and* his ideas for his verses. What does *he* do?"

"Oh, he writes 'em," said Michael. "Orde's all right. That's just what I like about him; he'll take all I'll give him. And I've plenty. I'm just bursting with ideas, Linda. I've got about three bran-new plays already in my head if this one goes at all. It's amazing: I never seem up the stump for a wheeze. It's all child's play, now we've got the scenario done. That was a job, I promise you. And alone I did it. Orde's help in getting out a scenario isn't worth considering. But I don't complain. I'd rather do it myself. It ensures the music being right, and that's all I really care about."

"Well, it seems to me that he's got you pretty cheap." Michael grinned. "P'raps he thinks so," he said. "Let him wait till I begin ordering the scenery and engaging my voices ! Oh, you needn't worry about Orde, Linda. I'll see that he pays for his fun."

"You seem very confident. Don't you think he'll object at all ?"

"Object ? Orde ? He eats out of my hand. He thinks I'm the most wonderful thing in music that's ever happened. He just goes about trying to pat himself on the back because he's had the brains to lay hold of me. I tell you he's enthusiastic. Talks about a ten thousand pound production ! He's engaged Arthur Craddock, anyhow ; and that merchant isn't to be had for nothing. Orde ? Why, Orde's in my pocket. I couldn't like Orde any better if he wrote like Gilbert. He's a funny kind of a machine, Orde is. Put in an idea and out comes a lyric, and a very decent one too. It's only brains he wants. And he can write words for *music*, and that's not what everybody can do. I give him any kind of a complicated tune and he fits it with words most miraculous ; words that generally just sing themselves. I can't understand how he does it, when he's such an ass every other way."

"So you're going to be freer now for a bit ?"

"Yes. I've got to rest a few days. It's no lad's job doing two men's work. I think I'll take a week off the play and leave Orde awhile to wrestle with what I've given him."

"I asked you," said Linda, "because I want you to come and start Psyche Whittaker's salon for her. She's getting restive. Michael, it'll be good for her to let her have her way. The poor little fool's ripe to break out if she's not amused."

"Oh rot, Linda ! Let her sweat. That's all my eye, my going there. Of course, I'm not going to play at being a celebrity for her or anybody else. You didn't think I meant it ?"

"Well, *I* meant it. And, Michael, I'm serious about this. I'm sorry for that child. She's spoilt for ever, of course, and nobody can make anything of her ; but she might get a good deal worse spoilt. All that's necessary to

keep her quite happy is a club and a few geniuses. She'll get the club pretty soon—she's managed to get put down for some woman's place or other that sent her a circular. Surely we can provide her with one or two honest, hungry Bohemians for a beginning. You only need to go once or twice and bring one or two people. Then you can stay away and leave your introductions to attract the rest of the galaxy. But you're essential to the scheme. You're the only artist I know, and I vow I'm the only creature she knows. She's got to have her salon or do something desperate. I prefer she should have her salon. So say you'll come one evening this week."

Michael scowled. "I wanted to go round the theatres," he said, "with you."

"You'll never see anything funnier than Psyche."

"Oh, it isn't fun I want ; it's ideas. I find I've not *seen* enough. I thought I knew all about play-writing, but I don't. I've got a lot to learn, and seeing things is the only way. It teaches you what to avoid and what goes. Why, for all I know they may be working half my pet bits of business in London at this moment. I'd look pretty if I put on stuff that had gone stale during this summer, wouldn't I ? "

"Well, give me one evening for Psyche."

"I suppose I've got to."

"Yes."

"Well, when ? "

As she spoke there came on the flat's door a loud knock. It made them both jump. They were so much accustomed to long hours of uninterrupted talk in this place that the possibility of anyone coming to trouble them never entered their minds. For a moment they sat looking at one another, then, suddenly, they were no longer good comrades, careless of a careless world's opinion, but a man and a girl alone in the girl's flat with all outraged propriety thundering denunciation on the door.

Neither spoke. In an instant they had become confederates for the safety of a shameful secret.

The situation maddened Michael. Their very innocence made what they were doing abominable. There was no shameful secret, yet must they sit immovable, glaring

silently at one another. Had they been the veriest sinners a more strict discretion could not have been imposed upon them. With all their ears they listened for departing feet.

Then came another and more violent rap, and Michael swore beneath his breath. He was cursing himself for a fool. Where had his wits been wandering to let him endanger Linda in this way? He could tell himself with clear conscience that now for the first time the conventional view of their long seclusions behind this door had presented itself to his imagination, but he was altogether too much upset to remember that nobody but himself and Linda was interested to the smallest extent in Linda's reputation. Every prejudice and false belief which he thought he had discarded and buried for ever sprang up from their graves to point accusing fingers at him, and for the moment the whole of mankind seemed to wait, grinning, upon the exposure which must surely come.

As for Linda, she seemed to herself paralysed by terror and ready to swoon.

A woman like Linda does not lightly do things of which the world disapproves, and you are not to suppose that either in ignorance or recklessness had she let Michael come again and again to see her at her flat, spend long hours there, and go away at any time of night at which they happened to finish talking. If Michael had done these things without reflection, it was by no means without reflection that Linda had allowed him to do them. A man may easily fail to observe that he is violating the conventions; a woman never. She does it with her eyes open. She risks so much more than a man that it cannot be otherwise. So Linda had weighed this matter deliberately, and deliberately had decided. She had been lonely; she had wanted Michael's companionship. She had seen that he never gave the question two thoughts. She had risked none of Michael's good opinion by letting him come, but she had risked the world's with full knowledge that she was doing so. Simply, the world's opinion—for what had she to do with the world?—had not seemed of sufficient importance to outweigh her own and Michael's convenience and pleasure.

And now as she listened to those insistent raps, suddenly

the end of all things seemed to be coming upon her. Guiltless though she knew herself to be, she was unable to derive any comfort from the knowledge ; for that which threatened was in no way concerned with innocence or guilt. Her eyes fell away from Michael's as, unjustly enough, a fierce resentment against him for his stupidity in exposing her to this most foreseeable danger surged up in her heart. He ought to have thought. What fools they had been !

All at once a shrill voice began to call her name, apparently through the letter slit.

" Linda, Linda. Come out, you old puss ; I see your feet. I know you're there. I heard you talking."

Linda's oppressed soul relieved itself in a laugh. " It's only that Psyche," she said.

III

Outside on the landing, faintly illuminated by the dim gas-jet which burned above her door, Linda discovered a tiny figure in the attitude of prayer. The monstrous hat which Psyche wore threw all the upper part of her into shadow. Her little hands were joined together beseechingly over her nose and mouth, and Linda could see nothing of her face but the whites of two eyes, rolled up for forgiveness, and shining strangely in the gloom. For a second or two she gazed sternly upon this mountebank without saying a word ; then, " Well ? " she asked in her shortest voice. She was very angry with Psyche, for the impertinence no less than for the fright she had caused.

Psyche broke out into a wail. " Oh," she lamented, " you're cross with me ! You're cross with me ! I oughtn't to have come."

"No," said Linda, "you oughtn't. Why did you?"

"I was bored at home. I simply couldn't stand it. I got desperate. And you were my only friend. And now, I suppose, you aren't any longer. Oh, I wish I was dead; I do really! But I won't stay where I'm not wanted. Here, let me go." She began to scramble to her feet. "Let me go out into the night. Nobody wants me. Nobody cares a hang about me. I'll go and chuck myself into the river, that's what I'll do." She turned towards the staircase with an air of gloomy resolution.

"I should," said Linda. "It might bring you to your senses a bit, you little duffer. What do you mean by coming out alone at this time of evening? What would your father say?"

Psyche halted and swung round. "He? He's in bed and asleep by this time. He don't care. Oh, Linda, I couldn't stick being alone any longer! I *had* to see somebody." She came back to the door and pawed Linda's arm. "Dear Linda," she coaxed, "don't be cross. You don't know what it is to be as bored as I am sometimes. *You haven't* temperament, Linda."

"Did Anthony know you were coming here?" Linda asked. She hardly knew what she said, so wroth was she at this barefaced attempt to force her hand in the matter of Michael.

"Not he. No one does. I just slipped out on my own. I couldn't stay any longer, and I wanted to see you. I can't hope to make you understand how bored I was. I *had* to do something, and I thought it would be an adventure. I got a taxi and came right along. I *was* scared, Linda. I thought the man was taking me to some fearful place to cut my throat and steal my earrings. I was too frightened to tell him to go back, so I just set my little teeth and stuck it out, and I'm glad now. But I nearly died coming up these stairs. They're ghastly. I say, what a frightful part of London this is! It's like hell must be. Such crowds of low people, and every other man drunk, I believe. I say, if I've got to go back you've got to take me. I *won't* go alone, not if I spend the night on this landing. I'm ever so sorry I did it, if I've vexed you. But I thought you'd be pleased, I did really."

"No, you didn't," said Linda savagely, and in a low voice. "You knew Michael Hoffman was going to be here. That's why you came."

"Oh, Linda, what a monstrous idea! Why, I never thought of such a thing, not until I was in the cab, at any rate. I remembered then, but it was too late. Don't I tell you I was scared stiff and didn't dare to tell the man to go back? But of course," she went on, with a sudden ludicrous assumption of offended dignity, "if you think *that* of me, there's nothing more to be said. Good-night, Miss Brook."

"Oh, come in, you little stupid!" cried Linda. "What on earth does it matter? Come in, now you're here. You shall have your wish. Come in while I put on my hat, and we'll take you home. Suppose Anthony should discover that you're not in the house! There'd be a pretty to-do, wouldn't there?"

Psyche shrieked with delight. "Why," she exclaimed, "it might come to waking up the father! What a horrible catastrophe!"

She began to whirl round the passage, laughing at the top of her voice.

"Come in," said Linda. "Stop jumping about and making that din. This is a respectable place. Come in, I say." She stamped her foot.

"You really want me? It's not just because you have to?"

"Oh dear me, yes, I really want you."

"And you *do* believe," Psyche lowered her voice to a whisper—"that I didn't remember about *him*"—she pointed through the door—"until I was in the cab?"

"Come in," said Linda.

"Very well; then I will. I say, is my hat all right?"

"Yes."

Psyche entered the flat slowly, dignity descending upon her like a cloak. Linda slammed the door upon them and pushed the girl into the sitting-room. "Miss Whittaker," she announced; "Mr. Hoffman."

Michael stood near the fireplace smoking feverishly. The terror through which he had just passed had left him whiter and more drawn even than he had been when he

had reached the flat that evening. While Psyche and Linda had been talking at the door he had stood stock still in the place where he had risen as Linda went out of the room. He had not heard a word of the girls' talk. His whole soul was absorbed in the contemplation of a great and marvellous escape. From what, he never asked himself. All he knew was that he had imperilled Linda, that danger to Linda had suddenly seemed to appear, and had as suddenly dissolved into nothing at all. But though a bogey be presently perceived to consist of a turnip, a candle, and a sheet, the effect of the shock that it can for a moment cause does not always depart with the exposure. Michael's eyes had been opened to stare danger to Linda in the face, and he had not yet recovered from that horrid surprise.

He looked stupidly at Psyche and said nothing.

"Michael," said Linda, "this is Miss Whittaker."

Michael remembered his manners. "Yes, yes, of course," he stammered, taking Psyche's hand. "How do you do?" he said awkwardly.

He became aware that the little creature was making him a fine curtsey over his hand. "*Cher maître*," she was murmuring. He thought her uncommonly ludicrous. It embarrassed him dreadfully that she should keep his hand so long between her fingers. Then he was suddenly amused. Then, as she rose up again, he saw how pretty she was, and he remembered that this girl had been persecuting Linda for a month to introduce her to him. He would have been quite inhuman if he had not felt flattered. He smiled upon her, but he found nothing whatever to say. He feared to be commonplace where he was expected to be brilliant. It was his first experience of homage, and in his heart he rather liked it. Then he met Linda's eye over the top of Psyche's hat, and he blushed and felt a fool. He wished Psyche at the devil.

Psyche was enchanted with her lion. He was so pale and tall and distinguished-looking with his lank black hair falling over his broad white brow. Mentally she put him into evening dress and sat him at her piano, illuminated by her candles. Yes, he would do most excellently.

"I've been longing for this moment," she said. "I adore genius."

Michael passed a hand over his forehead. He was aware that he was going to break out into a perspiration.

"Oh!" he said idiotically. "Do you? That's right. That's all right." He wished she would turn her admiring eyes from him, if only for one second.

"Linda tells me," she went on, "that you are willing to honour my poor little drawing-room one of these days."

"Ah!" he said, feeling for his handkerchief. "Delighted—delighted, of course."

"That is so good of you," she murmured.

Linda marvelled exceedingly at this new grand manner.

"Oh, not a bit. Not a bit," Michael groaned. "Linda," he said desperately, "I'm going to make some cocoa." He darted out of the room, mopping his brow, and they heard him slamming things about in the kitchen.

"I say," Psyche whispered, "how did I do it? All right? That *cher maître*, now; that was pretty good, wasn't it? It means *dear master*, you know, because I looked it up, though I knew *cher*, of course. I found it in a novel the other day, about Paris and artistic people, and all the big ones got called *cher maître* by the others. I made a note of it. Do you think he liked it? I say, he's awfully classy-looking. Why didn't you tell me he was handsome? I say, they expect a bit of kowtowing, don't they? Soft-soap. You know. Purring over, and that."

"Not Michael," said Linda, for she pitied her poor friend. "Just speak to him in your usual voice and way. He'll like that best."

"Will he? Honest? Well, that's good. I don't believe I could keep that kind of chin up for very long. Linda, I'm awfully pleased to have met him. I say, what's the matter with rushing him round to Pontefract Terrace this minute? I've kept the taxi. In case you weren't in, you know. It's a good taxi; goes like one o'clock."

"Ah," said Linda. "You'd have ventured back in it, then?"

"Psyche laughed. "You sly old thing," she said. "You caught me out that time. Of course, I wasn't scared an atom. I only wanted to soften your heart. But what do you say? Can't you both come back home with me?"

I'll put up something better than cocoa. You promised to bring him some time ; well, there's no time like the present."

"Well," said Linda, "I was going to take you back in a minute or two. Why not ? "

She had ceased altogether to be angry with Psyche. Anger with such a person was just a waste of good emotion. Her evening with Michael was spoilt now. Nothing could mend that. Why not, then, make the best of a bad job, take Psyche home—that had got to be done, and the sooner the better—and found the salon there and then. As Psyche said, there was no time like the present. She had promised to bring Michael. To do it now would save a lot of trouble and leave Michael free for theatres this week, as he wished. And Michael would be none the worse for the good supper which Psyche could be trusted to provide.

She went into the kitchen. "Michael," she said, "put out that gas. She wants us to come round to her place now. Do you mind ? "

He left the stove and closed the door carefully.

"Why does she talk to me in that terrible way ? " he said, hushing his voice. "You said she was a slangy little thing, but she talks like something out of *The Family Herald*. Did you hear her call me *cher maître* ? She's not guying me by any chance, is she ? "

"Not she," said Linda, "she thinks that's the way celebrities like to be addressed. That's all. She got it out of a book."

"Well, let her put it back—quick," he said.

"She wants us to come——"

"Yes, I know ; but I'm not coming. Shove her in her cab and send her off. I came here for an evening with——" He broke off. Suddenly he had remembered that there must be no more evenings with Linda, in the flat at any rate. That was settled. "Why," he said, "after all, I don't mind. All right. Let's be off at once." He burned to get away from the flat.

Linda understood. She too wanted to get away. Yet, illogically enough, she could not help feeling a pang of disappointment that he should make so little difficulty about giving up their evening together—their first evening

for four long weeks. She hated Psyche, suddenly, who could do such things with her fine eyes and clumsy flattery. With a chill at her heart she said, "Then I'll get on my hat," and went out of the room.

She found Psyche stretched on the bed, smoking.

"Will he come?" she cried. "Don't say he won't, because I've made up my mind that he shall."

"Yes," said Linda, "he's coming."

Psyche continued happily: "I think he's a dear; ever so handsome. I'm dying to hear his music. I suppose he can play without his notes. I say, we'll get him to play his opera right through as far as he's got it done. I say, Linda, do you think he'll mind if I sing to him? I'd like his opinion on my voice. I say, I ordered in a lot of beer and bananas yesterday. Isn't it lucky? I wonder how many he'll eat. Do you know if it's Bass he likes? because that's what I got. Large Basses, two dozen. Will that be enough, do you think, Linda? because I could send out Anthony. The pubs keep open pretty late, don't they? I say, shall I go into the kitchen and keep him company while you put on that roof of yours?" She began to get off the bed.

Linda thrust her down again with a firm hand. "No," she said.

CHAPTER XIV

I

THE cab had hardly stopped outside her home before Psyche was out of it and running up the garden path. As Michael and Linda joined her at the top of the steps the door opened and Anthony appeared. His eyes grew round as he saw Psyche. And, "Good God ! Miss Psyche," he cried, "where 'a' you bin ? I thought you was in your den."

Psyche pushed past him. "Pay the cab, Anthony," she said, "and then bring some supper for three. Bring it to the den. And, Anthony, let's have plenty of beer and bananas. They've come ? "

"Yes, Miss Psyche. But—"

"Right-o ! Then fetch 'em up. You see, I know what *you* like, Mr. Hoffman," she said to Michael. "I got it all out of Linda. Hang up your hat and come right through." She marched into the hall. "Bring him along, Linda," she called over her shoulder, "while I light up." She disappeared into the den.

"Wherever 'ave she bin, Miss Brook ? " Anthony asked.

"It's all right, Anthony," said Linda soothingly. "She came to see me. I've brought her back."

"Lord !" he said half to himself, "if she takes to goin' out o' nights it'll be a bit too thick. Can't you tell her something for her good, miss ? " he asked. "She don't know what's respectable and what isn't. She wants belence, miss. It oughtn't to be allowed. Mr. Whittaker ought to get somebody to live with her, some lady. He reely ought." The man was obviously outraged by this performance of Psyche's.

"I'll do my best, Anthony," said Linda, pleased by the man's solicitude for his flighty little mistress.

"Thank you, miss," he replied. "You see, I don't want to leave a good place; but a butler can't be too careful."

"Pay the cab, Anthony," said Linda shortly. She took Michael's arm and led him to the den.

One lamp only, a standard, between the fireplace and the piano, had been lit, and under it, bathed in rosy beams, sat Psyche, a lighted cigarette between her lips, and one knee cocked over the side of the enormous chair in which she had nearly buried herself. Her hat had been removed and lay on the floor near her. She was staring resolutely into vacancy. At their entrance she started and looked round.

"Ah!" she cried, "here you are. Do you know, I'd quite forgotten all about you two people. As I came into this room an idea for a poem flashed into my mind."

"Tell us about it," said Linda.

The pose had been a pretty one, and in gratitude for it Linda should have been more kind. Psyche, however, was not easily cornered.

"What!" she cried. "Tell you *now*? Never! Why, if I told you that idea I should lose all interest in it at once. An idea should never be *breathed* until it's worked out; should it, Mr. Hoffman?"

"Shouldn't it?" said Michael. "Lots of 'em are, though. I know a man who goes about breathing them in bars all day long. Several friends of his make their living out of them."

"Oh!" cried Psyche, "how interesting that is! Just think of that. What a shame! Now sit down, Mr. Hoffman, here, right beside me."

"Where'll *you* sit, Linda?" said Michael pointedly.

"Oh, that's Linda's chair," said Psyche, stretching a toe towards the other side of the fireplace. "That's hers and this is mine, and this," she laid her hand on a third, near her elbow, "is to be *yours*. I hope to see you often, now you've found your way—no, I mustn't say that; it's bromidic—now I've *got* you at last. Take a cigarette, won't you?"

Michael patted some cushions into comfort for Linda's back.

"No," he said; "I only smoke the cheapest and nastiest;" and he lit one of his Virginian abominations.

"Yes," Psyche went on, "this is the famous den; at least, it isn't famous *yet*, you know. It's going to be. This is where Linda and I gossip after lunch while the father's digesting his dinner. This is where she tells me all about your opera." Michael's eyebrows went up. "At least, not all. In fact, hardly anything. She's a close old oyster, Linda is. She pretends that she doesn't know anything about it. But I know better. Good old Linda! Oh! Linda's a trusty old dog, and that's what's the matter with her."

"Confound you!" thought Michael. "Not so much of the 'old,' if you please."

Psyche turned her face wholly to Michael and her back wholly to Linda.

"Now, Mr. Hoffman," she said, "I'm not going to ask you to tell me about your plot, because I understand that it's important to keep that quite secret. That's what Linda says when she pretends to know nothing about it—it's the *reason* she gives. But I do hope you'll play me some of your music. That can't do any harm. I'm not clever enough to steal music. I can make it up sometimes, just strumming, you know; but I can't write a note, and I'm a perfect idiot at remembering tunes. But I would love to have you play some of it to me. I want my friends when they come here"—she talked already as if her salon were in full running order—"to feel that their work is of tremendous interest to *me*. I want them to find me an inspiration. I want them to come ready to talk just as freely to me about their plans as if I were another self. Of course, I don't expect you to do this at once; you don't know me well enough for that. That'll *come*. So I don't ask you about the plot of your play. But please, please let me hear a few of your airs; just a few."

Michael looked over at Linda. He wanted to play his music to her, but not while this foolish flibbertigibbet was with them.

"Shall I, Linda?" he said.

"What about Mr. Whittaker?" asked Linda. "Won't it disturb him?"

"Not it. Lord love you, Linda, I make any old row at night in here. I can't be bound down to time when I want to play. Besides, he sleeps in the garden."

"In the garden?" cried Linda.

Psyche tittered. "Not in a tree, dear Linda," she said. "His bedroom opens off his study. Didn't you know? He had them both built at the same time, just after I came home from school. They're fireproof and burglar proof and sound proof. Oh, he's not in our way!"

"Well then, Michael——" said Linda.

Her foolish jealousy of Psyche had gone entirely. Michael had consistently and unobtrusively snubbed the girl from the moment of their leaving the flat. Psyche didn't count; she couldn't. And Linda very much wanted to hear Michael's music. I don't think she resented Psyche's presence as much as Michael thought she might; if anything, it would add a touch of pleasure to her listening. The music would be played for her, Linda, whatever Psyche might think.

Michael got up. "All right," he said.

But Psyche stopped him. "Not yet," she cried, "not yet, please. Wait till Anthony's brought up the food. You must have the bananas and beer before you begin. That's in your *character*, you know. I want you to play with a bunch of bananas and a bottle of Bass on the candle rest. That's how I *vision* you. I'll just hurry that old man up." She clawed herself out of the depths of her chair and ran across to the door. "Anthony," she shrieked out into the hall, "buck up with that fodder, won't you? And fetch me my hookah from the bedroom. This one's corked up with some beastly thing or other."

II

Michael played for an hour without a stop. This music which he had finished consisted mostly of songs and dance tunes. The opening of the play and the boy-brigands' entrance, with Claudina's first song from her window, were the only concerted numbers which Orde had completed to Michael's satisfaction. Songs may be written by either librettist or composer separately, and then handed over to be set or to be fitted with words ; but for a concerted number the collaborators must work a good deal together, and hitherto Orde had been too busy with the scenario and the dialogue of the first act to ask Michael for much help elsewhere.

Michael, however, had no difficulty in making his music continuous by improvising the few chords necessary to carry each air on into the next. He wanted to throw his stuff before Linda in a lump without any interruptions from their hostess.

Linda had not heard any of Michael's music for two years, because since his last visit to Lewes, before the smash, they had never been in a room together with a piano. It is an odd circumstance that Michael, while he had all this time visited her at her flat without a thought, had never so much as considered the possibility of her coming to see him at his lodgings. He would, of course, have thought any such proceeding highly compromising to her.

As Linda listened it quickly became clear to her that Michael's music had grown up. It had used to possess a dry kind of scientific quality which now she failed entirely to remark ; it had been student's music. But now, while the science was still there—she knew enough about music to appreciate this—it no longer obtruded itself. This music was jovial and large, warm with life, brisk, happy, hearty music, and now and then funny with that abstract comicality in which music alone can indulge. Technique had become the obedient humble servant of this man whom

formerly it had ruled and schooled. It did as he told it now.

Her memory went back to his last evening in her mother's drawing-room, when he had played to them a composition on which he had been steadily at work during the previous two months—a sonata thing, four long movements of it ; an extremely severe business. Anxious though she had been to enjoy it, she had been profoundly weary of it before it had succeeded in working itself out. Yawning behind her hand, she had wondered yet again why the music over which Michael took trouble should be so unlike Michael, so stodgy and decorous and correct, so different from that which he could improvise when, as he sometimes did, he condescended to play the fool with a piano. In those days she was always begging him to forget, for a week or so, that he was going to be a great man. But he never would please her. Time, he maintained, was much too precious to be thrown away. No, he would *not* work out and write down some of those little waltzes for her. He was too young, he said, to be serious over frivolity of that sort. It was all right for Beethoven to express his anger at losing a penny, and for Gounod to write dead marches for marionettes. Hoffman was not yet man enough for trifles. He proposed to stick to his sonatas and studies.

Well, he had been right. With his sonatas and studies he had got what no amount of waltz-writing would have given him. Linda knew, as she listened, that Michael was man enough for trifles now.

But it was curious to think that all this jolly music should have been called forth by worry ; that had he gone on working at his ease in Germany he might still be producing dust-dry pedantries ; and that it was only hard necessity which had forced him to adopt this human and genial strain. For the first time Linda's heart softened towards the elder Hoffman.

Psyche, having settled herself into a becoming and soulful attitude, remained in it for a full quarter of an hour. A real musician was playing real, bran-new music for her—and in her den. She was in a sort of ecstasy. This was her dream come true. Forgetting altogether after a few

minutes to listen, she busied her imagination with filling all the empty chairs with those celebrated people whose faces her researches in the illustrated papers had made familiar to her. Mr. Sargent sat by the window ; Miss Terry next to him ; Sir Herbert Tree in the cosy corner, with Miss Christabel Pankhurst and Mr. Edison. Over Madame Butt, in the rocking chair, leaned Mr. Shaw, proffering an ice. Madame Bernhardt was between Dr. Strauss and Wagner on the sofa. By closing her eyes for a moment Psyche could absolutely see Wagner on the sofa. Yet she did not really hope for Wagner. He was something very enormous in the way of lions. And from his pictures he seemed to be a very old man. She was afraid that he would be dead before she should be in a position to secure him.

Thus pleasantly fifteen minutes passed for Psyche. At the end of that time she began to fidget.

Was this Hoffman never going to stop ? She had asked him to play, but not all night, hang it ! Had the fellow no manners ? Did he think he'd been asked here to monopolise the piano with his old music ? It was very pretty—really charming, of course, but enough is as good as a feast. And it was about time he felt that he'd given them enough. Was nobody else to have a chance of doing anything, then ? This was not her idea of a salon at all. This was getting a bore.

She seized the occasion afforded her by one of Michael's improvised connections to begin a little applause. Instinctively she appreciated the value of hand-clapping as a hint to a performer to be merciful. "Delicious !" she began, but Michael, frowning fiercely upon her, held up his right hand and thundered menacingly on the bass notes. He absolutely terrified Psyche. She sank back in her chair and was still for several minutes. Michael went on remorselessly. He wanted Linda to hear all there was.

Presently he began the great waltz which had so successfully affected Orde. He smote it out passionately, gathering huge lumps of music off the piano with his strong, big hands and flinging it abroad in a sort of rapture. This was his favourite number, and he never played it without believing himself to be a noble musician.

Psyche slipped out of her place suddenly and began in silence to clear chairs and little tables away from the middle of the room. In a moment she had a free space. Michael, his eyes shut tight, swaying his body on the stool, produced magnificent sounds, to which Linda, lying low in her chair, listened, with her back to the room and her feet on the club fender, entirely absorbed. Her eyes were on the ceiling and her hand beat time. The waltz had cast its spell and she was aware of nothing else.

Psyche danced in the space she had cleared, silently upon the thick carpet ; danced to the music which Michael made. She was enjoying her evening again. This was much better. To improvise a dance to real new music played for her by a real musician—and in her den ; this was the sort of thing she had dreamed. She could imagine all the celebrities craning their necks and standing up for a better view of her movements. She was sure that she was dancing divinely.

Suddenly she was aware of Michael's eyes tight shut, of Linda's upon the ceiling, and she stopped dancing. A detestation of these two people flooded her small soul as she went back to her chair. The only comfort she had was that they had not known what she had been doing. For the rest of the playing she sat still, hating them.

When Michael stopped at last, he got up at once from his stool and, tearing a banana from the bunch on the piano, went round behind Psyche and sat down on the arm of Linda's chair.

" Well ? " he said. " What about it ? "

" It's good, " said Linda. " It's lovely music. But you were right to wait."

" Yes, " he said, " I ought to have waited longer. But I couldn't. Still, there's a sort of go about it. It's good enough to cast before swine."

" Thank you, " said Psyche, briskly from her chair. " I'm glad to know your opinion of me, Mr. Hoffman."

" Oh, " he said carelessly, " I didn't mean you, my dear." Michael was excited, and the deplorable habits of the theatrical profession are like burrs for catching hold. At the moment he was entirely a writer of stage music. Psyche was profoundly offended by the innocent familiarity. She

thought Michael the vulgarest and most odious person she had ever met. Had she been in a better temper it is probable that by calling her "my dear" he would have pleased her greatly. She would have regarded the expression as a delightful proof that she was on terms of intimacy with Bohemian society. For Psyche had not read all the novels dealing with the stage, upon which she could lay her hands, to be ignorant of the way theatrical people talk to one another. "I was thinking of the London public," said Michael. "My only doubt is if the stuff isn't too good for them, Linda. It's tuneful enough; but is it toshy enough?"

"Well, it certainly isn't toshy," said Linda.

"Do you know," said Psyche, determined to make her presence felt, "I should say that that's just what it is." She placed her head on one side and looked as critical and severe as she could. The frankest expression of opinion was to be the keynote of the causeries in Psyche's salon. She had reason to be satisfied with her effect.

Linda almost jumped. The pronouncement was so unexpected, so damning, and was given with so much confidence, that it actually imposed itself upon her judgment. For a second she seemed to despair of Michael's music. Then, as she saw a delighted grin slowly develop itself on Michael's face, she took heart again.

"Why," said Michael, "that's a finisher, isn't it?"

"Not a bit," said Psyche, quite happy now that he had turned to her. "I think it's very clever of you to write twaddle, Mr. Hoffman. The public don't want good music. That's well known, isn't it? I should say that what you've been playing to me is just the kind of pretty piffle that will make money in fistfuls."

"By Jove!" he cried admiringly. "It does me good to hear you. That's what I want, you know—money. You think I'll get it?"

"Yes," said Psyche; "I should say your play will be a great success. Popular only, of course."

"Oh," gasped Michael. "Of course, popular only. I say," he went on, "I must have some beer on the strength of that." He lost himself in the gloom at the back of the den, where on a table several large Basses awaited him.

"I say, Linda," he said presently, "did you recognise any of those tunes?"

"No," said Linda.

"Well, small wonder. You only heard them once, and then they were pretty unlike what they are now. Do you remember that kids' party you and your mother gave one summer, when the pianist came tight and had to be fired, and you kept me on the piano from seven till eleven, pounding away?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, I got two of these numbers that night. They were originally a waltz and a polka; but I've turned the waltz into a quick-step, and the polka's a ballad number now. I never made up so many dance tunes at a sitting in my life as at that party. Twenty, and I never repeated myself once. It was a record in its way. I didn't give entire satisfaction, though. I remember there was one boy who came and asked me when I was going to play 'The Chorister,' or some such thing, and when I told him I didn't know it, he said to the girl he was with, as they turned away, 'What's she mean by getting in a rotter like that to play? I suppose he's cheap. Looks it, anyhow.' I meant to tell you at the time, but I forgot; I was too busy. Well, you get the story now, you see. Wonder why I should remember it to-night. Do you know who that splendid child was? Not a Lewes boy, I know that. A plaster-headed child with pimples."

"It must have been Laddie Rumford," said Linda. "He was staying with the Arkwrights—they're his cousins—and he condescended to come to our party. I think he was in love with Clara Arkwright. They danced together all evening."

"Well, it wasn't Clara he was with when he put me in my place. It was Jessie. Probably he thought he had to give the other cousin a turn so as not to spoil her party for her."

"Linda darling," said Psyche, her voice sweet with annoyance, "have some lemonade, won't you?"

Linda remembered that Psyche was in the room, and suddenly she understood that the poor little thing must be in absolute need of being allowed to show off. She

declined the lemonade, and, "Michael," she said, "here's another chance for you to improvise for dancing. Psyche dances, you know. It's one of her specialities. She makes it up as she goes on. You ought to see her."

"Good," said Michael. He had played his music and was ready to be amiable. "Please dance for us, Miss Whittaker."

"Oh," she said, enchanted, "you may's well call me Psyche. Everyone does. At least, everyone's *going* to. I can't stand misses and misters. It's so rotten conventional."

"Well then," he said, "please dance for us, Psyche."

"That's better. All right." She rushed to the door and switched the room full of light. "But I'm no good, really, and I'm fearfully out of practice. I used to be topping at school, but I've done nothing at it since I left. I say, though, I *must* try. It'll be fearfully exciting making up steps while you make up the music. Do you think we can do it?" By this time she was posed, hands on hips and feet in the first position, in the middle of the space she had previously cleared.

"We can try," said Michael, going to the piano.

Psyche danced with joy in her heart. For this business she was really suited, though her skill was of the slightest; yet in dancing, perhaps more than any other art, youth and beauty and a lithe body and a certain feeling for rhythm can atone for a great deal of ignorance and technical blundering. Psyche was made to dance if she was made for any purpose at all. It was pretty to see her swaying her little person about in its tight, thin dress, and moving her little feet in quite accurate time to Michael's simple music. After a few years of persistent toil, Michael felt, a very successful dancer indeed might be made out of this young woman—a dancer to fire the hearts of certain capitals where the knowledge of true dancing does not dwell.

He played on till the girl was exhausted and flung herself on the sofa, panting, and praying for mercy.

"Oh," she cried, "but that was divine! Oh, Mr. Hoffman, what a time you've given me! If I'd known what it was to be I wouldn't have *moved* till I'd got into my dancing skirt. You mustn't think that you've seen me

dance yet, in this horrible stove-pipe thing. You must come again very soon. Linda, you'll bring him, won't you? Oh! but you've killed me, Mr. Hoffman. A glass of water, if you love me."

Michael got her what she wanted.

"What do you think of it?" she panted. "My dancing, I mean."

"You want to learn," said Michael kindly, "but if you'll learn you'll be very good."

Psyche pouted. "I suppose you're right," she said. "I *am* a lazy little brute. The fact is, I'm too versatile. I can do pretty well anything; can't I, Linda? I won't stick to one art and master it. I can draw jolly well when I take the trouble, but that's just what I won't do. Look at that thing on the easel. Lift the cloth."

Michael uncovered a small canvas, on which the appearance of a woman's head had been thrown, if not with vigour at least with violence.

"There," Psyche continued, "I did that in two hours yesterday morning. It's Eliza. She was mad when I made her pose; wanted to do her work because it was her afternoon out. But I gave her five bob, and she was quite pleased. Well, what do you think of it, Mr. Hoffman, for a quick oil sketch? It's all right, isn't it? There's the beginning of something good in it, eh? But I shall never do any more to it. I'm bored with it by now. That's my trouble; I'm always beginning things, and that's so rotten of me, isn't it?"

"Sing something," said Linda.

"My dear woman," cried Psyche, leaping from the sofa and hastening to the piano, "how do you fancy I can sing after capering about like that for the last half-hour? It *was* half an hour, Mr. Hoffman, wasn't it? In one way it seemed like only half a minute, and in another it seemed like half a century. I got so blown. We'll split the difference and call it half an hour. But if Mr. Hoffman don't mind, I *would* like to sing one small thing to him. Of course you understand, Mr. Hoffman, that I'm in no kind of voice; I couldn't be, could I? But I want you to hear me, because I want to know what you think of my singing. Candidly, you know. I don't care for anything else. I

expect it's just the same as all the rest of the things I do. I could be first rate at it if I would work, but I won't."

With no more preparation she banged the piano and began an American ragtime song about coons and moons. Psyche's voice was true enough for easy music like this. She gave out her song with great spirit and much rolling of the eyes, while she splashed the accompaniment about and wriggled her body in time to the lilt. But it was the voice of a mouse—a young mouse.

She ended with a minute shriek, rose to her full height of four foot seven, a first finger planted dramatically on the last note she had played, a tiny little note high up among the treble keys, and, throwing her hair from her eyes with the other hand, "What of it?" she demanded.

"Why," said Michael, as civilly as he could, "you sing very nicely, but, frankly, you want a little more volume. I think I should stick to dancing and painting, Psyche, if I were you." He got up out of his chair. "I'm afraid," he said, "I must carry Linda off now. This is enough dissipation for her for one night. Good-bye, Psyche;" and he held out his hand. "Thanks for the party and your dancing."

Thus ended the first soirée of Psyche's salon.

CHAPTER XV

I

MICHAEL had spoken confidently enough about taking a week's rest, but he found himself quite unable to do it, for the taskmaster that sits inside a man is often a much more grudging holiday-giver than any who pays wages. Only an absolute breakdown could have kept Michael from working now—and he wasn't within three years of a breakdown. Perhaps if he had been resolute enough to resist temptation on his way to Linda he might have held himself back for a little while ; but those few notes, scrawled in a tunnel on the back of an advertisement, were his undoing. No sooner was he in his bedroom, after taking Linda home, than he was seated at his big table, working for his life. By three in the morning he had his song to his liking, tumbled into bed and fell to weaving new melodies. At four he made some notes by dawn-light and finally slept. At eight he was up trying his new song over on his piano and feeling after an accompaniment to the noted air. His landlady brought him some breakfast ; it lay neglected on its table. At half-past nine he dressed, swallowed some cold fish and some stewed tea, and went to Hampstead to instruct the daughter of a grocer in the art of touching the piano.

That afternoon a telegram was brought to Linda while she read. It said : "Don't expect me to-night. Overwhelmed by brain-wave. Writing.—M." A postcard awaited her at her flat, expanding the message of the telegram and begging forgiveness. "I'm charged with tunes," he wrote, "so that it hurts, and I've simply got to let them go. I've never had such an attack. It must be what they

call inspiration. I'd rather like it if it didn't keep me from you. But I daren't enjoy myself with all this stuff crowding to be uttered. Suppose I took this week off and then found that I'd run dry. Those theatres must go for the present. And there's more concerned in this, Linda, than a week's junketing for you and me."

Linda sighed for her lost evening, but because she knew what he meant by his last sentence she went to bed with a great joy in her heart. After all, they could spare a week if it brought them a lifetime. But she could not rid her memory of that haggard face of his, and she desperately feared that he was going to overwork himself. The last post brought her another card. "Send me lots of these," it read. She tucked it under her pillow and got back into bed. She would try not to worry. As she was very tired she soon went to sleep, planning postcards.

So their life went on as before, he working furiously, she reading all day to her incredible Mr. Whittaker, or listening patiently to the vapourings of his temperament-ridden child.

During a fortnight of this period she was relieved largely from the latter burden by the presence at Pontefract Terrace of a certain Miss Georgie Burns, the school-friend whose advent Psyche announced during Linda's first lunch with her.

This Georgie came from Glasgow. Her father manufactured chemicals with great success in Rutherglen. She had, therefore, plenty of money. Though she was not more than nineteen years of age, Georgie had known her way about for a long time. The school at which she had met Psyche had been her fifth ; it had only been her last because she reached, during her year at it, the age when discipline is thought to be no longer necessary for girls. She was thoroughly sophisticated, brimming with cheerful spirits, quite vulgar, plain, large, good-natured, and she allowed Psyche to think that she believed her to be the most beautiful and brilliant girl that had ever been created, for which reason Psyche adored her. When they were together they were always screaming with laughter.

Linda found Georgie very tiresome, and was glad that she was so anxious to make the best of her time in London.

Only once during her visit did she and Psyche take their lunch at Pontefract Terrace. They were out, as a rule, all day long, shopping, visiting picture exhibitions, sitting at concerts and matinées, and adding to Georgie's knowledge of the London restaurants. Georgie, as a woman of the world, aspired to be reputed a gourmet—we all have our vanities—and she was content to swelter round the Academy all morning under the guidance and instruction of Psyche if only Psyche would allow her to display her familiarity with French dishes by ordering their luncheon in some terrible little Soho restaurant whose fame had not yet reached so far as Glasgow. By a miracle the two adventurers escaped a poisoning, and Georgie returned home safe and sound and a little fatter, about the end of June.

The one fly, for Psyche, in the amber of this time was her inability to introduce Georgie to the dining-room of the Maidenhair Club, an institution for whose membership she was still a suppliant.

II

I mention this young person, Georgie, not for any interest which she possesses for me or for you, but because, after her departure, it became evident to Linda that Psyche had been benefiting by her friend's wide experience of men and things to satisfy herself upon one or two matters. In her talk such phrases as "Georgie says" or "Georgie tells me" were now frequent. Particularly was this the case where she spoke of the theatre, which obsession, subdued for a time by the immediate prospect of a salon, now again was seen to raise its head.

The truth is, the salon hung fire deplorably. Here was

nearly a month gone by, and Michael—upon whom everything depended—had never again illuminated the den with his presence. As for any new stars for the constellation, they were not apparently so much as contemplated. Poor Psyche could get no satisfaction from Linda at all. Michael was busy, immensely busy. The music was just pouring out of him. Orde was doing excellently. Two acts of dialogue were written, and nearly all their lyrics. The press was being admirably worked. Here Linda would produce little preliminary puffs, skilfully worded and placed by the energetic and competent Craddock, cut out of their columns and forwarded to her by Michael.

Thus Linda handed on the information which Michael sent her. So long as she kept her mouth shut on the plot and the name of the play she knew that no harm could come of talking about it. The matter was entirely at her heart, and she enjoyed telling Psyche about the progress of the great undertaking. At this time Psyche did not have it all her own way in their chatters.

But however much Linda enjoyed doling out all these scraps of information, they gave Psyche hardly any pleasure at all. Apart from a vague feeling that she was receiving early news of things artistically important, and so might be said to be “in the know,” Psyche was bored by Linda’s gossip. She wanted to hear that Mr. Hoffman would come again soon, the actual date of his visit, the names of some people that he was going to bring. It advanced the salon project not an inch to learn that he was working night and day, or that Mr. Orde was enthusiastic. Really interested in nothing but herself, she could at any time derive only the most modified delight from hearing about the success of other people. Had Michael been a regular visitor to the den, had the salon been gathered, had a galaxy of brilliant intimates waited in suspense for the verdict of London upon the work of a brother star—had this been the case, Psyche’s position would have seemed to her entirely enviable. As it was she found it disgusting.

Georgie had gone. The dull old life had begun again : nothing to do but potter about in front of an old easel all morning, or write old verses which nobody came to hear ; no one to see but strangers in the street, or the servants,

or dear old Linda at lunch. Existence seemed quite rotten for a temperamental and lonely artist.

Only the thought of her approaching election to the Maidenhair kept Psyche up at all.

I have said that the recrudescence of the stage-fever which Linda perceived in Psyche's talk at this period was one of those matters which exhibited the influence of Georgie. Psyche, when speaking of the theatre, still showed a good deal of ignorance, but this was by no means so profound as it had hitherto been. Georgie, the compendium of all worldly knowledge, had cleared up many of those doubts and fears which troubled Psyche's half-hearted ambition to be an actress.

One day, for instance, Psyche broke in abruptly upon something that Linda was saying about Michael's affairs with, "Eliza's an ass!"

"So?" said Linda.

"Yes, that's Eliza," Psyche continued. "An ass. Will you believe that she thinks that the only way to go on the stage is to take a place in panto at Drury Lane? She's got a cousin or something who did that, and she thinks there's no other way. She went round to the stage door and applied, and showed her legs to a man. It's perfectly awful, isn't it? I don't see how it's allowed, do you? Think of going on in tights! I suppose servant people don't mind, though. Eliza's an ignorant fool. Why, she's never even heard of voice-trials or theatrical agents or anything. Fancy that! Did *you* know about theatrical agents, Linda?"

"Yes," said Linda. "I tried some of them once, but they never did anything for me."

"You!" screamed Psyche. "You tried to go on the stage, Linda? Oh, poor darling old Linda; what an idea! But why did you never tell me?"

"Oh, I didn't try long. It wasn't any good."

"Who did you go to? Leonard Pontifex? Georgie says he's about the best."

"Yes, I tried him. And Cust."

"Oh, Cust's nobody. Georgie tells me he's quite low class. All provincial work. She says there's only Pontifex or Allabone who's any good. She knows a wonderful lot,

Georgie does. Her people do themselves pretty well, you know, and they know all sorts of folk. They're quite interested in the theatre and always have a box for everything that comes to Glasgow. And they know a whole lot of actors and ask them home to supper. That's how Georgie knows so much about the stage. She doesn't want to go on it herself—she's too good a time—but she's interested in everything, Georgie is, and she gets it all out of the actors when they come to supper. You ought to hear her talk about them ; it's most exciting. You know she's going to have me up there in the winter. Isn't it lovely ? ”

And again : “ Georgie says,” she announced at another time, “ that it's all skittles about actors and managers being wicked and horrible. She says they're just delightful—all she's ever met, anyhow, and she knows dozens. She says she'd trust herself anywhere with any of them. At any rate, she says none of them ever tried to make love to *her*. I think she's rather sick about it, between you and me,” she ended with a titter.

“ I expect,” she went on presently, “ that I shall meet some theatrical people up there this winter. That's absolutely the very best way of going on, Georgie says—to meet managers in private. They're far more likely to take you if they think you can afford not to want any salary. Some people absolutely *pay* to act, Linda. Did you know ? Ladies, I mean.”

“ Well, don't do that,” said Linda. “ It's very nearly a crime, I think.”

“ What on earth do you say that for ? ”

“ Why,” cried Linda hotly, “ don't you think it's unfair to pay for an engagement that someone else is starving for ? Do you think it's right to have heaps of money and go and cut out poor people from their livings because you want a little excitement and fun ? Well, I don't.”

“ Tuck in your shirt, Linda. I see what you mean, of course. But suppose a girl has a real *call* to the stage, suppose she feels herself a true *artist*—”

“ Well, then, let her go and fight her way in among the others, at the stage door ; not pay to be taken, or offer to go without a salary.”

“ But Georgie says that's so much the quickest way,”

Psyche objected ; at which Linda shrugged her shoulders, argument being useless.

Several times during this month Linda wrote to Michael asking him if he couldn't spare an evening for Psyche, and bring some man who could, at any rate, be passed off as an artist. She wouldn't have worried him, but for two reasons. First, she longed to see him and to assure herself that he was not doing himself damage by his labours ; and secondly, she was getting really anxious about Psyche. The girl, since Georgie's departure, was every day more clearly approaching the moment when she would imagine herself to be desperate, and unless her mind were diverted from her own loneliness and friendlessness, and from her continued failure to justify her existence by employing some one of her extraordinary talents to the full, she must soon, Linda feared, commit some stupid folly or other of the kind she was always threatening. Nearly all her talk was now of the stage and managers and agents and touring companies, or, more generally, of the fuller life for women and the wickedness of allowing gifts to rust for lack of employment, or the sin of stifling the Art that a girl feels within her. One day she wanted to join the Militant Suffrage Movement. Her imagination had been directed into this channel by some fine pictures in *The Daily Mirror* of feminists in procession, twenty, thirty, or a hundred thousand of them, many clad in historical and becoming costumes. She leaned over Linda's shoulder in the den, thrusting with a finger at the various notabilities on the page before her. "Look at Joan of Arc," she giggled. "What an old *Thing* ! But can't you see *me* in armour, Linda, on a big black undertaker's horse ? My stars, how I'd knock 'em in the Old Kent Road ! "

Or she must be off to Paris at once to study painting under some man there whose name she had read in *The Studio*. Linda supposed that she must have been reading over again that book which had inspired her to call Michael *cher maître*. It was visible on that day among the cushions on the sofa in the den. For an hour Psyche discussed with Linda, or rather with herself, which of the two, Mont Parnasse or Montmartre, was the better locality for the student to settle in. As neither she nor Linda knew any

thing about the matter she made very little advance towards a decision. One thing came out during that talk. The Paris life models sat to the classes with absolutely nothing on. Psyche imparted this dread secret in a whisper, and though Linda shrieked her disbelief (she was much too kind to disappoint Psyche) the enormity was repeated ; yes, and the book on the sofa was searched for proof. Georgie had said it, too. At length Linda was convinced. She said that Psyche ought by no means to think of going to a place where such things were allowed ; but Psyche pooh-poohed her. Poor old Linda ! This was Art they were talking about, not mothers' meetings.

But Psyche always came back to the stage and the best way of getting on to it, and the hopes she had of her winter in Scotland. The salon she hardly ever mentioned now. Linda was inclined to believe that this, too, had been but a passing whim. The stage seemed less and less to be that.

III

Michael turned a deaf ear to Linda's appeals for an evening. "It can't be done, Linda," he wrote, in answer to her last. "I'm in the full flood of composing, and I can't spare a minute. And if I could, do you think I'd waste it on your absurd Psyche ? Wait awhile. I have a mighty project for the time when I'm a bit free at last. It may come any day now, for I can't go on turning out stuff as good as this at this rate very much longer. What d'you say to a day in the country ; a snuff of the down breeze and a sight of our chalk-hills away across the Weald ? We'll go to Haslemere by the earliest train, breakfast there, and sit on Black Down till dark. That'll be as near to God's sky as we can climb. I don't propose Lewes

—obviously. Not yet. That's to be kept until we're famous. As for this Haslemere day, it mustn't be just yet, either. I'll give you good warning, and I'll try to make it a Sunday, so's you won't annoy your Whittaker by playing hookey. For as sure as God made little apples, you've got to come with me, Whittaker or no blooming Whittaker."

This didn't sound like overstrain. Michael was evidently thriving on his toil. Linda hugged the thought of the Haslemere day and gave up troubling him. She doubted by this time if the arrival in the den of twenty undoubted celebrities could win Psyche back to the idea of a salon. Simply the girl had tired of it, and to whip a tired fancy into life is perhaps the most hopeless task that a human being can take up. Linda abandoned it, though sadly. She didn't want Psyche to break out.

IV

Often she was tempted to speak to the student of Anglo-Saxon Fiction about his daughter, and once she tried.

She chose a moment when they were parting for the day. The man had just finished dictating a criticism of a new and very popular story, and he had read it over from Linda's fair copy in a satisfied voice. Evidently he was pleased with it, felt that he here had done something good. He handed it back to her with a word of thanks. He had never been so condescending.

"Good-night, Miss Brook," he said. "Till to-morrow, then."

"Mr. Whittaker——" Linda began.

"Yes, Miss Brook?"

"I wanted to speak to you about something," said Linda.

"So it would appear, Miss Brook. So it would appear. Well, Miss Brook? Well, well?"

"It was about Psyche——" she began.

"Dear me, Miss Brook," he interrupted, "I know of nothing that you can have to say to me about Miss Whittaker."

"Well, there is," said Linda bluntly. "She's bored to death. She's——"

"Miss Brook," he cried, suddenly raising his voice to a shout, "be silent. My daughter is no concern of yours."

"She is of yours, though," said Linda, obstinate to go on now she had begun.

"I will not have this," he cried ; "I will not—I will not! Understand me, Miss Brook. You are here to read to me, not to interfere with that which does not concern you. If you prefer the second to the first, I do assure you that your opportunities for indulging your impertinence will be very few."

Linda had her bread to earn. She had Michael to repay. She said no more. What was the use? Mr. Whittaker's very violence seemed to speak of a knowledge that he was neglecting his child. A man cannot show himself very ready to take offence unless he knows that he is in the wrong. If, then, Mr. Whittaker had wilfully left Psyche to herself, it was not likely that he could be persuaded to change his conduct towards her. In the voice with which he spoke of his daughter Linda had heard the unmistakable note of hate. Perhaps the girl was right. Perhaps this poor fool had schooled himself to detest the child who had robbed him of his wife, and yet, from some muddle-headed notion that he was doing his duty as a citizen, constrained himself to afford her a roof and food and an allowance. Perhaps by his very generosity in the last particular he sought to buy back his satisfaction with himself. Linda saw that it was as useless to inquire into these things as it was fond to hope to set them right—that evening, at any rate. But though she left him at once, she was not done with him. She promised herself another attack.

Only, of the words he had said, "impertinence" rankled. She felt that, perhaps, it was warranted.

v

It was in the third week of July that Linda suddenly woke up to the fact that Psyche wanted to act in Michael's play.

One has the measles a long time before one knows it. For many days one may or may not be conscious of not being in the very best of health ; then, on a morning, a rash is discovered and the doctor is summoned. As with the body so with the brain. The intention that lies behind a series of hints will often remain quite unperceived until some word, some gesture, some impatient exclamation illuminates, and the problem stands complete and formidable, not to be avoided.

Psyche's hints were not, as a rule, easy to miss ; but she had approached this matter cautiously. She comprehended that the enterprise was a hard one. Had Linda shown the smallest sympathy with her desire to act there would have been no difficulty at all. It was not any lack of confidence in her own power to play exquisitely any part at a moment's notice that made Psyche hesitate ; nor was it any doubt of Michael's perfect willingness to give her a place in his cast. Had he not said nice things of her dancing and singing ? Nothing but Linda's open hostility to her plan stood in her way. Had she known Michael's address, or could she have got him again to Pontefract Terrace, she would have dispensed with Linda's assistance altogether ; but Michael could only be approached through Linda, and Linda accordingly had to be placated.

Often Psyche blamed herself for not having made use

of the opportunity presented by Michael's visit ; but she could always assure herself that at that time she had not made up her mind. Then she was still frightened of the stage. It was Georgie who had resolved all her doubts and terrors. Georgie thought she would do splendidly. Georgie had promised active help in the winter by introducing her to some provincial touring actor-manager. Georgie had decided her to act. And now if she could go and do it on her own ! What a score over Georgie that would be ! To write :

" DEAREST GEORGIE,—I am sorry I can't come to see you this winter as I am engaged to play lead in the next piece at *The Broadway*, and expect to be busy for at least two years to come. Thanking you all the same for your dear kind offer of assistance. Devotedly, PSYCHE VAN LOO.
" PS. Sorry to disappoint your manager friends, but the provinces no longer attract me."

That would be a letter that it would be a real pleasure to send to dear old Georgie. It would make her sit up a bit ! And why not ? Hoffman's play was to come out soon ; perhaps in the autumn, who knew ? If she should be in it, she *must* make a hit. All she needed was a chance to show herself on the stage in London. Whether Hoffman's play succeeded or failed didn't matter a continental. One night of it would be enough for Psyche Van Loo. It was, perhaps, a bit too much to expect lead at *The Broadway* right off, but once let her be seen, and it would be funny if she was out of an engagement a week after Hoffman's play finished. It appeared to Psyche that in between her and all these delightful things Linda alone stood. Even if she could get Hoffman's address out of Linda it wouldn't do to approach him direct, without letting Linda know. She and Hoffman were extraordinary pals, that was evident ; probably in love with one another—the Lord knew why. Linda could be trusted to queer the pitch unless she was taken in. She'd be mad jealous if anybody tried to get at Hoffman behind her back. Linda had to be squared ; that was sure.

But how ?

Thus Psyche meditated, not without cunning.
At length, one day, she opened her campaign.

"Linda," she said, "I've been thinking over what you said the other day about paying to go on the stage. I see what you meant. It isn't the clean potato. Art's a republic all right, but not a pluto-what-do-you-call-it? I mean a thing where money goes all the time. Artists ought all to start fair, just with their brains and their talents. Money oughtn't to come in. Isn't that right?"

Linda agreed. She was rather pleased to hear Psyche talk in this way; but she was mystified. Vaguely she felt that something was behind this sudden surrender of an often-defended position.

"I've decided," Psyche went on, "that when I go on I shan't let my money do anything for me. I shall just go to a manager or an agent and say, 'Here I am. I want a job.' I guess my face'll do the trick, don't you? It'd be a bit rough on the other women to open a purse on him as well. And it'd give me no satisfaction, Linda, to think that I'd *bought* my way in. That's right too, isn't it?"

Linda said that it was quite right, and Psyche turned the talk to other matters. She left the impression of her reform to sink in.

"I suppose," she said next day, "that the autumn's about the best time for getting an engagement. I think I shall try then. Or would you put it off till the spring, Linda, and spend until then taking lessons in dancing and singing, and perhaps in elocution and acting? I've all the time there is, you know, and of course I don't imagine that I'm up to professional form in any of those things."

Linda naturally advised her to take lessons and put off her attack on the theatre till the spring. Perhaps this unfortunate ambition might be choked by hard work.

"Begin your lessons in the autumn," she said, "and stick to it all winter. You'll be much more likely to get a place then."

"Why not begin now?"

"Well, if you wish. But won't you be going away soon? You're not going to stay in London all summer, are you?"

"I suppose so. We always do. The father can't be put out in his precious work, you know. I suppose you'll

take your holiday soon, though? I expect I'll commit suicide while you're away, Linda, old girl. If Georgie was any use she'd have asked me to Scotland now instead of in the winter. But she's going to Canada. I might cadge an invite from Maud or Pudgie at Liverpool, but I don't really care about it. London's not bad in August, no worse then than any other time. I say, lessons'd be something to do, eh?"

Before their talk was done it had been decided that Psyche should begin lessons in singing and dancing at once. But nothing came of it. They hunted through an *Era* or two for advertisements, and Psyche wrote to three professors for their terms, but she never accepted any of them. She didn't in the least want to take lessons. She had had enough of that sort of thing at school.

The speech which opened Linda's eyes at last to the drift of Psyche's desires was an excuse the girl gave for not being more active in the matter of the lessons.

"What I really need," she said one day, during luncheon, "is not a lot of stupid lessons, but practical experience. Georgie says that you can learn more in five minutes *on* the stage than in five years at academies. And she says that a girl can't begin to act too soon. All her actor and manager friends say so. Now, if I could get into a play—a musical play, you know—quite soon, where there was somebody—an author or a manager—who'd take a bit of interest in me and encourage me, *that* would be worth everything to me. But, of course, I don't know anybody like that, unless—" She stopped and made bread pills.

Linda went on eating her cutlet, perfectly aware of that which she was desired to say. At last she had comprehended.

"Oh, Linda," cried Psyche, "couldn't you get Mr. Hoffman to put me in his play? I'd only want a little tiny part. Just a few scenes and one song or two and a couple of dances. Isn't there a pretty nursemaid in it, or something of that kind?"

This was the beginning of the persecution, but it continued steadily. "No," was an answer that Psyche couldn't take.

At first Linda was quite definite in her refusal. She

knew too well Michael's opinion of people with money who professed art after the manner of Psyche, to believe that he would move a finger to help the spoiled child into any play of his, and she had learnt from Michael herself to hate the breed—though not, perhaps, so heartily as he. She understood, at any rate, the wickedness of these easily circumstanced people who use their money to carry them where their brains must fail, and she was quite unprepared to swallow her convictions for Psyche or anybody else.

If she ultimately consented it was not because she was wearied out of further resistance by daily contention. Linda had as much capacity, where her principles were concerned, for holding out as had Psyche where her fancies were at stake. She was a stone that dropping water could not affect.

It was the devil—masquerading as an angel—who turned the scale one day in Psyche's favour by suggesting to Linda that Michael's play might be made the means of sickening the girl of the stage once and for all. Linda was enchanted with the idea. If Michael would only let the girl have a place somewhere in his chorus and then, once she was engaged, turn his stage-manager loose upon her to bully and harass her during a month of long, tiring rehearsals,—if this could be accomplished, would not Psyche's craving for self-expression quickly fasten upon some other, some more comfortable means than the stage? Linda felt that she must be very subtle to imagine such a plan. And it seemed hopeful: Michael would surely see the comical side of it; his co-operation would surely be given. The scheme was a little cruel, to be sure, and not entirely fair, and this might be his view of it; but if Linda could justify it to herself she would undertake to justify it to Michael. And she was clear as to its essential rightness. ~~Psyche~~ Psyche, of all people, was unfitted for the stage. What she must, in the end, do with herself Linda could not imagine; but meanwhile any plan which might save her from the stage could result in nothing but good for her.

It was evident that very soon she must have her will. Why not give it to her in the way which should be the least disastrous?

Another thing. Michael would be about, and for Linda's

sake he would keep one eye open on Psyche's doings. There would be danger for the little fool, that was of course ; but if Michael would only take a little trouble it could be reduced to a minimum.

After thinking this over for three days Linda surprised and delighted the aspirant by telling her that she would ask Mr. Hoffman, at the first possible moment, to take her into his play.

Psyche wanted her to write that minute, but Linda assured her that the thing could only be done in talk. Michael, she hinted, would require a good deal of persuasion, because he had strong views on influence. Psyche grinned behind her hand, because Linda was so sure that she knew what Hoffman would do and what he wouldn't do. Good old Linda ! How surprised she would be when Hoffman jumped at the proposal.

Then she began to plague Linda to see Michael and arrange the business. Surely to goodness he could spare five minutes of his precious time. Here she came up against a brick wall. Linda could not be moved to ask Michael to meet her. She was waiting for her day on Black Down. It would be soon now, Michael wrote.

CHAPTER XVI

ORDE had every reason to be pleased with his venture. Hoffman had proved hard-working, resourceful, and punctual to a degree of which his collaborator had never dreamed. Orde knew something about professional musicians ; had suffered many times under their dilatoriness and scamping. Chalkley had been a fair example of the composer, enthusiastic, during their joint work of the previous winter, over the simplest little air that he discovered as if it had been a complete masterpiece of opera, burning with a consuming eagerness to "get it down," to prepare the band parts, to set an orchestra at work upon it ; and after a week, having failed to write a note in the meanwhile, equally enthusiastic about another tune, equally under the necessity of putting that other instantly into shape. It had been the same with the ghost work that Chalkley had done for him. The man had been clever as a cat, capable of making the dullest air sparkle, but not to be relied upon for a moment. Lock him into a room, deny him access to any alcoholic drink whatever until his task should be finished—this was the only way to be sure of getting anything out of him. And so with others who had toiled to earn fame for Orde. As a class the musician was a sheer nuisance. Orde had, in the past, often considered the advisability of learning harmony for himself. I think if money could have bought the power he would not have spared it. Almost any expense, he felt, would be better than living continually at the mercy of these maddening wasters.

Of Hoffman, therefore, he had not expected very much.

His music was too good for its inventor to be anything but erratic and unsatisfactory. Orde supposed that within a year or so he might be placed by Hoffman in possession of a more or less workable score.

And behold ! this man, whom he had expected to drive, driving him ! Orde couldn't keep any pace with the music that was brought to him. Himself a slow worker, he soon began to look upon Michael with an admiration that was not entirely unmixed with annoyance. A fellow who could roll it out like this ! But he went rather too quick, confound him ! Orde found his leisure time almost at an end. Each morning the thought of Michael's coming dragged him from his bed hours before his usual time.

At first he had taken it easy. Having the whole plot to master and the scenario to rough out on the lines given him by Michael he could, in those early weeks, always plead, for the little he might have to show, that unexpected difficulties of construction had arisen to delay him. But when the scenario had been settled, no more excuses of the kind could avail him. All he had to do now was to turn narrative into dialogue as wittily as might be, and to construct verses that would carry out the ideas on which he and Michael had agreed for the lyrics. Fired by Michael's example, emulous and unwilling to seem inferior, he very foolishly put a tremendous strain upon himself in order to produce a solid first contribution of lines. Michael praised him. Orde, pleased, repeated his performance, carried the dialogue right into the second half of the first act. Michael slapped him on the back. On the following day some friends asked Orde, by telephone, to accompany them on a river-picnic from Marlow to Windsor. Orde went. Who the devil was Hoffman to keep him in London to-day ? Next afternoon Michael raised his eyebrows over a miserable scrap of dialogue. But though he said nothing, his collaborator vowed he shouldn't put on that particular air again. Orde, in truth, ached for praise at all times, and from Michael he found its savour peculiarly sweet. But this devil Hoffman was so ready to take hard work for granted that it was no easy matter to extort so much as a word of commendation. At best it was, " That's all right Orde ; " or, " Good man. Stick to it. "

Often and often during those hot months Orde threw down his pen and asked himself why in Heaven's name he should sit sweating away in London all day at this confounded play when it was open to him to be anywhere he pleased. "One'd think the man was paying *me*," he grumbled. But though now and then he broke out, went to Lord's or Ranelagh for an afternoon, and once to Ascot for the day, an uneasy conscience always went with him, and he would hurry back and sit far into the night, making up deficiencies.

And all the time Michael kept on throwing music to him as a keeper throws fish to a seal. Orde's appetite increased something by practice, but he was never hungry enough or quick enough in the swallow to keep pace with Michael. He was perpetually behind. The pile of finished music, waiting for words, seemed ever to increase upon him.

After a time, I have said, his appetite grew larger. Lines began to come more easily, and when they came seemed more humorous than before. In lyric writing he had always been happy, and this part of his task prospered well enough. Had there been no dialogue to write, the waiting music would not have waited nearly so long. But the dialogue was the devil.

Nothing was easier to write than dialogue of a sort. It simply ran out of the pen. But Orde aimed at writing something better than dialogue of a sort. His lyrics satisfied him entirely ; he meant his dialogue to do the same. Such conscience as the fellow had made it necessary for him to do his best ; such shame as encumbered him prevented him from taking everything—the music, the plot, the ideas for the lyrics—from Hoffman without giving good value in return ; such soul as was in him advised him that the money he was going to spend was not—however much of it there might be—a fair exchange for the brains and labour which Hoffman contributed. Orde hated to feel the inferior of his partner.

If he accepted Michael's help to such a great extent it was—so he told himself—not because he had no ideas of his own, but because Hoffman was such a devil to work.

It was impossible to keep up with him and devise ideas of one's own too.

Hoffman had been thinking about the play for two years. He was full of ideas for it, good most of them and perfectly ready for use, fitting, too, with the music that had been written, and in many cases necessary to the plot. It would be a grave mistake to refuse to accept those ideas simply because they were offered. Had he, Orde, been two years on a play, not a doubt but he would now be equipped with just as many schemes, and wheezes, and notions, and bits of business as was Hoffman for "*The Conspiracy at Capri*." But he, Orde, was come new into the middle of Hoffman's plans. Far better not to interfere—so long as interference was unnecessary.

So Orde took all that was offered him.

But if he gave Hoffman his head for the time, if he submitted tamely to the other man's instructions, endured his raised eyebrows and looked for his smile, he never lost sight of the fact that he, Orde, as the capitalist to the venture, was the person upon whom every decision must ultimately depend. All this was for the present ; later on, when the play was finished, that would be time enough to assert himself. Orde was in no way convinced that the public wanted comic opera, however good it might be. Sometimes, while under the influence of Hoffman's enthusiasm for his chosen medium, he was able to believe that comic opera was the "*coming thing*," that musical comedy was dead, that a fortune awaited the man who should realise this and act upon it. But generally he had his doubts, his very considerable doubts concerning the future of comic opera. He would think of "*Lucette*" and "*The Fan*" closed down the previous season, the one within the week, the other within the fortnight ; and as he passed the pit queues at Daly's and The Broadway and The Gaiety, the vigorous appearance of a deceased form would fill him with anxiety. Orde wanted solid success for his money ; the artistic kind would not satisfy him at all. It would do him no sort of good to have his name associated with a failure—however beautiful. But he kept these thoughts to himself now. Hoffman was resolved on comic opera and was producing great quantities of valuable music. For the time this

was good enough for Orde. Their contract was not yet signed.

It was ready, however. Orde had seen it and had assured himself that it gave him full control. He was waiting for the good moment to produce it, the moment when Hoffman, having emptied himself of material and having grown into a belief that Orde was a thoroughly obedient person, should be ready to regard the contract as a mere formality, should sign it without troubling about its contents, or, if he should read it and discover that it was not quite to his liking, should find himself confronted with the choice between signing and throwing away the work of months and the thoughts of years by withdrawing from the venture. Orde counted, you see, not only on the proverbial carelessness of artists, but also on the sharp eagerness that the sight of food gives to appetite. A contract which at the beginning of the collaboration Hoffman would have examined through a microscope and rejected in hot indignation would, with production just round the corner, be read hastily and signed as "a formality." Hoffman would be too anxious to hear the orchestra giving out the first bars of his overture to trouble about anything else.

It becomes more and more clear to me that Mr. Orde was mistaken in supposing himself unsuited to the commercial life.

To Orde, from the beginning, Michael had left everything where the payment of money was involved.

"You've promised me a good production, old man," he said, "and I put all that quite in your hands. Since you're shelling out for both of us, it's up to you to say how the coin shall go. I'll tell you what I want in the way of scenery and dresses and artists, and I'm sure you'll do all you can to meet me. I warn you that I shall ask a good deal. I know just what I need, and it's expensive. But if you can't go quite as far as my notions, I shan't grumble. I don't think you'll lose the ship for a ha'porth of tar."

All human undertakings exhibit a propensity to enlarge their scope in the teeth of the most resolute determination to restrict it. We know that a man who begins to build

a house for one thousand pounds commonly ends by disbursing three. Michael knew this and counted on it. Orde might commit himself at first to no more than five thousand pounds ; by the time he had spent four of them he would probably be ready—nay, anxious—to back the play for ten thousand. Michael, at any rate, hoped that this was what would happen.

He said very little about the scenery and dressing of the play during these first months. There would be time enough, he said, for all that when the score and the script were nearerer completion. Their business at present was to get the play written. At that time they talked of producing in the spring following ; the autumn seemed quite out of the question. The speed with which they put their work behind them at first surprised and then delighted them. It was not so long a business as they had thought, this play-writing. Why, at this rate they would be done with the thing by the end of August ! It was Michael who suggested an autumn production.

They had finished an afternoon's work. Both had done well since they had last met. Michael had brought two songs and the rough idea of a concerted number ; Orde had ready for criticism six scenes of dialogue and the first verses for three lyrics, for which Michael had given him the music. They were thoroughly pleased with themselves.

“ Why, Orde,” said Michael as he poured beer into a tumbler, “ we're a couple of sons of guns of noble toilers. Does it happen to occur to you that we've only been on the job since the middle of May, and that we're halfway through already ? It's been like shelling peas to us. And do you know why ? Because we spent all that time on our scenario. We know just what we want to do. We don't waste any time wondering. We just swim down the stream. Why, I'd begin rehearsals to-morrow with what we've got.”

“ Hardly,” said Orde.

“ Sure, Orde,” said Michael. “ Why, half these musical comedies begin rehearsals with far less. Do you know how much they began Gower and Meon's *Lass from Lampeter* with ? One act, three song-lyrics, and the chorus

stuff for Act I. Why, they didn't even know what Gower meant to do with Act II.; and when he took that toss in a taxi and broke his poor neck there wasn't a note of his plans anywhere to tell them. Luckily Gower and Harry Meon had quarrelled, or Meon might have been in that taxi, and *then* where would the music have been? Of course they got in the doctor as usual and three lyric-writers, and patched up a second act somehow, and Foscari only had to postpone for a week; but it was touch and go. The thing ran a year and a half, you'll remember. That's the way musical comedies get written, Orde. Just anyhow."

"Well," said Orde, "I shouldn't care to start rehearsals now. I'd want a bit more of the book, to be happy."

"Sure," said Michael, "I don't want to do it, either. We're not writing musical comedy, remember. I only say we could do it. But at this rate we'll have the whole thing finished by the end of August, for a start, at any rate. Of course, we can't get it absolutely just so until rehearsals begin." He began to walk about the room. "I say, Orde," he said at last, "what's the matter with producing in September, or early October? We can do it, you know, and the sooner the better. Some of them might put on an Italian play in front of us at any moment, you know. That wouldn't be any good to us."

"No," said Orde, "but it seems quick work. There's such a lot to do."

"Not a bit," cried Michael, fired by this idea. "Not a bit, my dear man. What's all we want now? A theatre, some scenery, some actors, some band parts. That's all. You can get your theatre as well now as in six months. Of course, there may be nothing free, but there's no harm in trying, and if there is you don't want any time to take it. Most of your actors you can get in a morning, and your band parts in three days if you hustle. For the scenery there's fids of time. You think it over. It's your show, and I'm not going to insist on this—I don't want to do anything in a hurry—but if you'll be guided by me you'll produce in the autumn. You'll want to get a manager, of course, and a producer, and one or two little things like

that. But it can be done if you get the right men. And, by the way, I met Dick Burke last week. He's about the best man you could get for a producer, and he's at a loose end just now, as it happens. That's rather like luck for us, eh ? "

"Very possibly," said Orde. "I don't know him."

"Well, you'll like him when you do. He's a worker, Dick is."

"And what about a manager ? " said Orde. "How would Cust do ? I know him a little."

Michael sniffed. "H'm ! " he said, "Cust. He's not up to much, you know ; " and to lead Orde away from Cust he returned to Burke and spoke enthusiastically of that producer's capabilities.

When he went away he had persuaded himself, and believed that he had persuaded Orde, of the perfect feasibility of that which he had proposed.

Orde, however, was not entirely persuaded. His caution, stunned (if not lulled to sleep) by Michael's violent address, revived when that enthusiast had gone away. An autumn production ! That was getting down to business with a vengeance. October ! Not two months off. There would be the deuce and all to be done before then. Orde doubted if they had anything like time. His stage experience was small, and he knew Michael's to be not much greater. He was afraid the thing couldn't be done. Hoffman was not practical. Difficulties didn't exist for people like him when they were talking. He just passed on over them ; settled them with a puff of smoke. That was all very well while a man was talking, but difficulties had a way of not being disposed of so easily.

Still, if it could be managed, an autumn production was desirable, highly. As Hoffman said, an Italian play might easily be put on somewhere before the spring. An Italian play was about due. There had been nothing of the kind for five years, since that frost "The Prince of Parma." It would never do to be cut out like that. Hoffman's music was too Italian altogether to alter the locale to Dalmatia or Greece. Orde wished he had a better knowledge of that which was, and that which was not, possible on the stage.

They had many arguments about the feasibility of an autumn production, but Orde could never be quite convinced. Michael, however, was resolved that the thing should be, and stuck to his man diligently.

CHAPTER XVII

I

THE Haslemere holiday when it came—it was, of course, a Sunday—proved notable on three counts. Michael refused to have anything to do with Psyche as a member of his company ; Linda paid her debts to Michael ; Michael and Linda became engaged to be married. Of these in their order of time.

Psyche was settled in the train going down. The argument was a hot one, for Linda was eager to win ; it lasted from Waterloo to Worplesdon, near which place Linda became convinced that her cause was hopeless. The insufficiency of Psyche's voice could not be argued down. Her loneliness, her danger, her uneasy longing to do something more with her life than fool it away in dabbling half a dozen arts, these might have prevailed had she been able to sing. Her money, the unreality of her ambitions, these might have been overcome had she been fit to be in Michael's chorus. The subtle remedy for Psyche's stage-fever which Linda had imagined had no success. Michael treated it as he had treated Orde's doubts concerning an autumn production ; he blew it out of the carriage window with a lungful of smoke. "It's kind enough," he said, "and it's pretty crafty, and it's rather comic ; but these rehearsals are not going to be anything *but* rehearsals. We're going to make a play, not run a curative establishment. You've no conception, Linda, what a lot I shall have on my hands. I can't take on the additional burden of your Psyche. I shall want all my wits to see that the music's going properly ; I shan't have any time, either, to stimulate the producer when he lets up in his hounding

of the girl, or to see that she doesn't go out to lunch twice running with the same boy. It can't be done, Linda. I'm sorry, but it can't be done. The short and long of it is that she can't sing for toffee, and there's no room on any stage for my play *and* a girl who can't sing better than a good deal. This is vital. It's a bedrock difficulty in your way. The little fool may be, as you say, quite determined to do nothing in the buying-in line ; her ardour for a theatrical life may be as big as it pleases, and her talent as wonderful as she supposes ; her situation at home may be as sad as sorrow—but her voice is rotten, and she can't come into my show. Don't think me a brute. I see things a bit more clearly than you, that's all. My music has got to be *sung*."

" Well, one girl won't make much difference, will she ? "

" That's just the point. One girl will make all the difference. You don't know the theatre, Linda. Why, you can't imagine the trouble there's going to be when we begin to try voices. Leave Orde out of the question—he seems a cold-blooded sort of fish and not likely to have any pets to please, though one never can tell—but first, it'll be our business manager who'll put forward some woman with a pretty face and a voice like a rusty hinge and propose her for a show girl ; and then it'll be the stage-manager with some nice little friend who dances charmingly, and when she opens her mouth turns all the milk sour for three miles round ; and then the comic'll be trotting out a real little peach with a tin whistle in her throat that he'll tell me is the sweetest voice in England. Oh, I know the boys of the theatre ! Thank Heaven, Burke's going to produce—at least, Orde's promised me Burke, if we can get him. I don't believe Burke'd try to get his starving mother a dresser's place if he had one doubt of her ability to keep frocks in order and fetch beer quick without drinking any of it.

" Well, will you tell me how I should look if I tried to turn all these beauties down and was busy all the time working your Psyche into a thinking part ? Why, my only chance is to be solid as a rock against bad voices, never mind how pretty the faces are or how fond of them the business manager and the comedian and all the others

happen to be. If I were an established man I shouldn't worry, but I'm not, and it'll be all I can do—with Burke backing me up, as he will—to get a chorus that can sing, without knocking myself out in my first round with those boys by leading your Psyche forward by the hand."

Thus the fine project died and was buried, so far as Linda was concerned.

Over the programme followed by the holiday-makers we need not linger. They breakfasted about eleven o'clock in the sunny window of an hotel in the main street of Haslemere, and their breakfast was a hearty one. Michael had thrived on his second long bout of work; I suppose it was the change from distasteful labour to fascinating invention which accounted for this. At any rate Linda, as she watched him swallowing eggs and cutlets and great slices of toast and marmalade, as she filled and refilled his cup from the coffee-pot, and as she listened to the last chapters of the story of "*The Conspiracy at Capri*," was able to banish all fears for the immediate collapse of his body and brain. She pressed him to eat, but he needed no pressing.

The music was not quite finished. Had it depended on Michael there would have been no more to write, or else they would not have been at Haslemere on that day. But, as we have seen, Orde had not been able to keep pace with his more prolific and impetuous collaborator. There were still many tunes for Orde to fit with words, and at least two large concerted numbers for which Orde had not provided Michael's material. This day at Haslemere had been snatched while the composer waited on the lyric-writer. While Michael revelled, Orde, it was to be presumed, had his nose industriously upon the grindstone. This thought added relish to Michael's breakfast.

"Poor old Orde!" he said. "Just about this time he's getting out of his bed, and while we'll be climbing up through the gorse and fern he'll be sitting down to his scene in the Blue Grotto, where the Capri populace enters in boats singing that barcarolle thing. He'll do it all right, too. That's the amazing thing about Orde. He hasn't an idea in his head, but he can work on mine quite beautifully. He hasn't written anything very funny yet,

but we'll get all that in at rehearsals—all that's necessary ; but his words can be *sung*, and that's good enough for me."

" Won't he object ? " said Linda ; " I mean to your putting things in during rehearsal ? "

" Not he," said Michael ; " he's quite obedient, you know. And he wants the play to be a success. Besides, I don't think he's very many illusions about the artistic nature of his job, or about the preciousness of his lines. All Orde wants is to be entertained by the Savage Club and call Frohman Charlie, or whatever people who know him well do call him. That's all Orde's out for. He don't mind how many people help him to get it. Hang it, he's been sucking my brains now for two months, and he's got a plot and a set of lyrics. Why should he object to sucking Burke's brains for some funny lines, or Old Joe Chatterton's, if we get him for our comic, or anybody else's. It's all for the good of the show ; that's to say, all for Orde's good. When people laugh at something that Burke's put in, they'll admire Orde and say what a thundering wag he must be. That's all right for Orde, isn't it ? Just as they'll say what a clever dog he is to have invented the plot of the play and all those neat little songs. That'll be all right for Orde, too. He's welcome to it. Oh ! Orde's cheap at a plot and a few ideas if he'll only shell out big enough. And I think he's going to. He's as keen as mustard about the piece, and already imagines himself slapping Angelo Foscari on the back and telling him to cheer up, and he shall have an Orde play next winter, if he's good."

He went on to talk of the prospect of the autumn production and repeated for Linda's benefit all the arguments in favour of it which he had offered to his collaborator. Linda was entirely convinced.

" Why," Michael cried, " there's practically nothing to be done now. We've got the whole thing ready, except a few numbers, and they'll be done in a week or two if Orde'll only put his heart into his job. But Orde's a cautious customer. He's afraid to commit himself until he's got everything under his hand. You see, I might die, and where would he be then ? However, I do believe he'll

risk it. Yesterday we had a great encounter, and he weakened visibly at the end. I expect he'll think it good enough all right."

Linda was furious with Orde for so much as hesitating, but refused to believe that he could be serious. It was so obvious to her that Michael's play must be produced at once.

II

They were soon climbing the steep byroad which leads to the crest of Black Down ; then through a mile or more of wood, and then—out on the heather for the rest of the day. They found a good place among trees on the very lip of the great hill, whence they could see that whole vast theatre that the rolling Weald makes with the two lines of the North and South downs. And here in the shade and the sweet wind they sat all day talking, or now and then staring into the blue distances for minutes together, silently, tasting the air and the scene and their own nearness to each other.

Linda was glad that they had not gone to Lewes. She wished to make the most of the present, not spoil it by unhappy thoughts. Yet when their talk languished, as it often did before evening (for the top of Black Down in fine weather presents marvellous opportunities for silence), she sometimes turned her eyes eastward across the Weald, to that quarter where their old town lay among its hills—the hills which she and Michael had walked so gaily, the hills where they had made their young plans for the accomplishment of tremendous things ; and she sighed now and then, but very softly, for she did not mean to wake memories for Michael with which he did not seem to be at all troubled.

Of anything but his play Michael could not or would not talk.

He had brought a basket crammed with delicacies from one of the German shops that he loved : potato salad, many large tongue-and-ham sandwiches, a box of sardines, some olives, and cakes of every kind. Beer had been bought at the inn where they had breakfasted. Linda's tea basket—a relic of prosperity—had come with them. They were provisioned for a siege of twelve hours. It was monstrously good for Michael, after much London, to lie in this cool nook on the top of this fine large hill, and with fat eyes watch the sun travel from east to west, while he ate good food and smoked and talked unreservedly about things that mattered to a girl whom he loved and who understood what he was saying. He wallowed in his moment.

The sun was going down and they had packed their baskets, when Linda at last managed to ask Michael for his purse. He gave it to her, wondering a little why she wanted it. When he saw her dropping sovereigns into it he gave a small cry and moved as if he would snatch the thing back. Then, suddenly, he changed his mind and waited, silent, till the tale of the repaid debt was told.

She returned the purse to him, and "There," she said, "that's done."

"Yes," he said slowly, "and now you're happy again?"

"And now I'm happy again," she said. "Michael dear, I think you understand what this means to me. I hated this debt once, and I won't pretend I'm not glad it's paid. But I've learned to love it, Michael. For it means that I'm here instead of"—she nodded her head at the point of the horizon where Brighton and Lewes might be supposed to lie—"over there. It means that I've won through so far, and by your help. I won't thank you, but I wanted to say this: it's your help that's made winning through so good. And now," she cried, jumping up from her knees, "say good-bye to the view and come along."

"I wonder," he said without moving, "if you understand what this means to *me*."

She halted and looked down at him. "I wonder," she said, smiling a little nervously.

"Do you?" he asked. "I wonder if you do wonder."

He got up slowly and put his arms round her. "Do you?" he asked, looking into her eyes. What he saw there made him kiss her on the lips.

"Good," he said quietly. And then, "By God, I've got you," he shouted so loudly that she shrieked.

There was an answering shout at a little distance, and looking round they perceived a tall young man in knickerbocker suit of green tweeds, who sprang towards them actively across the heather. Together they watched him come. As he neared them Linda moved slightly as if to disengage herself from Michael's grasp, but Michael only tightened it on her. The young man arrived to within about ten yards of them and halted. Michael's genial smile amazed him. They regarded him in silence, infinitely pleased with him. He fingered his little fair moustache.

"I 'eard a shout," he said at last, stammering with excitement. "An' I *did* think I 'eard a scream." He seemed to be a clerk out for a day's exercise, a gallant and chivalrous clerk, walking for his health.

"Yes," said Michael, "this lady screamed. It was I that shouted."

"I suppose, miss," said this young man, still hesitating, "that it's all right then, eh?" He was evidently loth to retire without Linda's positive assurances.

"Oh yes," said Linda, "it's all right—perfectly."

"Absolutely," said Michael. "Magnificently."

The young man was at length convinced that his presence was not needed.

"No offence, I hope," he said, blushing. "None meant, I assure you. Made a bloomer—seems. Sorry. Better pop off, perhaps."

"Before you go, sir," said Michael, "may I say that I admire you? This lady admires you, too. May we shake your hand?"

Extraordinarily embarrassed, the youth permitted them to do as they wished. Then he raised his hat and went away, probably wishing that he was dead. He walked very fast and was soon lost to sight among the trees that hid the road to Haslemere.

They followed him more slowly with the baskets.

III

As they came out of the wood-road on to the common that drops down the steep hill into Haslemere, Michael halted, snuffing the air.

"Here," he said, "it's good-bye to our hilltop, Linda. When shall we be here again, I wonder. There's a tough time before us if that Orde'll only do the right thing and produce in the autumn. To-morrow I'll set about him in earnest, and if he agrees there'll be no more days in the country for you and me, dear—not this summer."

"Then," she said, "don't set about him. I want more days like this—though no day can ever be just like this—and I want them soon."

"Ah!" he said, "but I want more than that. It's not a day in the country once a week that's good enough for me. I want you, Linda, all the time; and that play's going to give you to me. God! if it succeeds, what can't we do together! Let it run for one little year in London, and you and I need never worry again. We'll have such a lump of money that there's nothing worth while in life that won't be ours for the trouble of taking it. We'll travel, Linda; we'll go to all the good places that you've only heard about. Some I can show you and others we'll discover. We'll begin with Capri, I think; don't you? That would be only fair to the little island. Oh! it'll be great to see all those wonder-places together. No more Pontefract Terrace; no more stupid old Anglo-Saxon Whittaker; no more silly little Psyche for you, my Linda. Give me a year of 'The Conspiracy,' and I'll look after the rest. Oh, I've enough music in me to-day to last for the next hundred years. Think of our wealth, Linda! Royalties in London, royalties in the provinces for ten years to come, royalties in America and Australia and France and Germany, and royalties on the music rolling in all the time and all together. Royalties! What a delicious

sound that word has. Royalties ! They're going to give you the life you ought to have. Bless 'em ! And bless Orde ! I'm sorry I ever said a hard word about him, noble fellow. Royalties ! Let me say it again ! ”

“ Mercenary creature,” she said.

“ So I am,” he cried. “ I'm not an artist to-day. I'm a lover. And a lover ought to be mercenary. What's money for but to spend on the girl one loves ? And the more one has the more one can do in that way. Oh, I want all the gold in the world this evening, Linda, and I've got to take you back to London third class.”

“ Yes,” she said ; “ and if we stop up here much longer, spending all our money, we shall miss the train and have to walk.”

“ What odds ! ” he cried. “ It's only forty miles. I'll carry you easily. Look at the sunset, Linda. Hang the train ! Look at all that gold above the hills. Look at those lovely pink countries where you and I are going to wander so happily.”

“ Let's go before they fade,” she said.

“ Yes,” said Michael, “ you're right. Practical girl, you're right. Let's go quick.” He took her hand and raced down the hill with her.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

WHILE Michael had been making love, Orde had been making verses. All Sunday the author-capitalist kept himself at his task, and by the evening he was greatly pleased with his result. It appeared that he had been inspired.

There before him, in a neat little pile, were the complete words of two songs, the whole of the Blue Grotto chorus entrance, and most of the short finale to Act III.

Orde thought of the approval which his labours must extort from Hoffman on the following afternoon, and smiled a satisfied smile. Begad ! when he, Orde, put himself to it, he drove a pretty useful pen !

He tucked his verses away in their drawer, dressed, and went out to dine at his club. There, after dinner, he received an idea of his own and made a charming little lyric of it. Begad ! he was in form to-day. But this was enough. He would not do another stroke of work. He procured a long cigar and sat down to rest his tired brain.

He began to think about that autumn production, and never before had its possibility seemed so near to him.

So far as Hoffman was concerned he had never had a doubt. The fellow, unless he got smashed like Gower, was fit to compose all the music that should be required of him, and at a minute's notice. And if he, Orde, cared to make up his mind, he was man enough for the job. His performance of to-day was sufficient evidence of that.

Yes, if it only depended on the author and the composer, an autumn production was quite possible. And it was distinctly desirable. Distinctly.

The only trouble was—could it be done? Could they get the scenery and dresses and people ready? . . . The comedian, for instance . . . ?

And the theatre . . . ?

For the hundredth time Orde wished very much that he knew more about the practical possibilities of the question. Hoffman was just an enthusiast; difficulties didn't exist for Hoffman.

Orde felt strongly the need of competent unbiassed advice.

Teddy McKay, the third-rate agent who had managed his and Chalkley's little play, was out of the question as an adviser. Orde never wanted to see Teddy McKay again.

It occurred to him that Cust—the only other agent he knew—might be worth consulting. Cust was a well-known agent—a competent man, a person with practical knowledge. He had met Cust once or twice in bars and places. Cust would be able to tell him—in a friendly way. There need be no question of employing Cust. Then he remembered Hoffman's sniff at the mention of Cust's name. Perhaps, after all then, Cust would be a very good man to consult. If, by any chance, he and Hoffman were not on the best of terms, his opinion would be only the better worth having. Hoffman, for instance, would prefer him to go for advice to that Burke—Hoffman's own particular friend. Most probably.

At any rate, it would do no harm to ask Cust what he thought. If Cust said, "Go ahead," perhaps it might be done. If not, well, Hoffman would have to wait till the spring. Before he left the club Orde had decided to consult Cust.

Next morning (Monday) he was in Bracegirdle Street by eleven. Cust was out, playing matador in a tea-shop to

kill the leaden hours. Only five unbeautiful girls sat in the outer office waiting to see him, five girls to whom Cust had nothing to offer that day, to whom, indeed, Cust would never have anything to offer. His clerk thought it quite unnecessary to disturb Cust on account of those five girls. They did not mind waiting, the clerk reflected, they were used to it; and Cust most emphatically minded being taken from his dominoes without good cause.

Orde, however, was a different matter. At first the clerk thought he was nothing more than an actor, though he didn't know his face; but what Orde said showed the clerk plainly that the time had come for Cust to cease playing matador. A gentleman whose business was to consult Mr. Cust about a production must not be kept waiting a moment longer than was necessary.

The office-boy was fired out of the place, and Orde was desired to take a seat.

A few minutes later the five girls were pleased to see him enter Cust's room. They were pleased because they knew that Cust was now back from his appointment with the West End manager, whose name the clerk had very properly and professionally suppressed. They hoped Orde would not be long with Cust, because they all wanted to call on other agents before they went back to their respective suburbs. It was very important for those five girls that they should get a shop quickly.

"Mr. Orde, isn't it?" said Cust, looking at Orde's card to make sure of the name. "My clerk tells me you have some business to discuss with me."

"I don't suppose you remember me," Orde began, "but we met once in the Leicester Lounge and again in the Monico. I was with Tertius Ray."

"Of course, of course," said Cust heartily. "Dear old boy, Ray. One of the very best. What's he doing now? I've not seen him for a coon's age. Yes, I remember perfectly. Mr.—ah," he looked again at the card, "Orde. And how can I serve you, Mr. Orde?"

"The fact is," said Orde, "that I'm writing a musical play."

Cust consigned his clerk to hell. An author! Good lord, he had been dragged here to see another author of

another musical comedy, had he? But Orde was so very well dressed that Cust withheld himself until he should know more. It might be an amateur show that was in the wind.

"Ah?" he said gloomily.

"I may tell you at once," said Orde, "that I propose to finance it."

The effect of this statement upon Cust was excellent. He brightened up and offered Orde a cigarette.

"I'm writing this play with a man called Hoffman," Orde continued, declining the cigarette and taking out one of his own.

"What!" cried Cust. "Mikky of that ilk?"

"Yes, Michael Hoffman."

"I know him," said Cust genially. "A dear fellow. Hot tempered, but a dear fellow. And clever, no end. You, I presume, are doing the book, Mr. Orde."

"That is so. We have a good deal of it done, and we are thinking of producing in the autumn."

Cust drew his chair close to the table. "Ah," he said, "in the autumn. Of course you know that the autumn is the very best time you can choose?"

"Yes," said Orde; "the only question is if there *is* time. The play isn't finished, you see."

"How much have you got done?"

Orde gave him a rough estimate of that which they had prepared. Cust didn't listen. He was too busy thanking Providence for sending him a mug at this particularly slack time.

"That," said Orde in conclusion, "is about what we have. Hoffman is confident that we can get the whole thing ready in another month. Now, where I want your advice is in this. Can we produce in October—supposing that the book gets done as quickly as we think? I want to do this thing well, Mr. Cust; not extravagantly, but well. I shall want quite new scenery and good dresses, for instance. But I am not very clear as to how long these things take to prepare."

"I would undertake," said Cust, "to get you a complete new production in three weeks. There's not another man alive that could do it, but I can. If you've got as much

play written as you say, you can begin rehearsals the day after to-morrow—chorus-work, at any rate. Your principals will, of course, take a little time to decide upon and to engage. But chorus ! I have only to hold up a finger and the best chorus in England is yours. Absolootely ! Say the word, and the voice-trial will be held to-morrow, and rehearsals can begin the day after. I'm a hustler, Mr. Orde. At least, I have that reputation."

Orde was impressed, and showed it.

"Oh," he said, "we're not in such a thundering hurry as all that. You think, then, that an autumn production—"

"It is essential, Mr. Orde, and as for it being possible, why, of course it's possible. Heaven ! you should see the way some of these plays get put through. Why, last year I got a script and score at ten on a Monday morning, and we opened at Harrogate on the Monday fortnight following. And not a hitch. A perfect first performance. But that's *me*. When I get going, things move, I can promise you. By the way, did you want me to look after this little show of yours ?"

Orde had nobody else in his eye, and he had nobody to ask about an alternative to Cust. He had heard that Cust was a capable man. He had to have someone. Why not Cust ?

"Possibly," he said. He would not commit himself.

"I shall be charmed," said Cust. "I suppose you know all about Hoffman ?" he asked carelessly.

"I only know him very slightly," said Orde.

"Oh," said Cust. "Now, in confidence, Mr. Orde, and strictly between ourselves, I could wish that you had another collaborator. Mikky has some bee in his bonnet about me. I think he's cross because I tried to get him a shop and couldn't. Now, mark you, I say nothing against Mikky, nothing at all. He's a dear old thing, but I only suggest to you that you're careful how you deal with him. He's clever in more ways than one, Mikky is."

Cust thought it well to discount the objections to his managership which might be expected from Hoffman. The agent had not forgotten that the musician had been very rude to him. Cust never forgot things of that kind.

"But since Mikky's the Orpheus of the combination," he went on, smiling amiably, "Mikky it is. Only don't you be surprised, Mr. Orde, if he tries to put you on to another agent. He would rather, I'm sure, do his business with a man with whom he's a bit thicker than what he is with me. Very wise of him. Very sensible of him, indeed. I'd do precisely the same in his place. But mark you, Mr. Orde, I'm saying nothing against old Mikky. He's no more slippery a fish to deal with than anybody else in his line of business. But if he persuades you not to employ yours truly, why then, quite as a friend, let me earnestly advise you to be very particular about the contract you sign."

"All right," said Orde, thinking comfortably of the document which lay in the office of his solicitor. "I'm pretty wide awake, thanks. Then I won't keep you now. This is just a preliminary chat. You think it can be done in the time, then?"

"Think? I *know*. It's a moral. Well, good-bye, and whatever comes of this talk, I wish you all luck and success and a four years' run. Good-day, Mr. Orde. This way, if you please."

Orde left Bracegirdle Street filled with a vague suspicion of his collaborator.

III

When Michael arrived at Orde's rooms that afternoon he had had forty-eight hours in which to convince himself that Orde had practically agreed to an autumn production. He had forgotten by this time that the spring had ever been contemplated. It was with him, now, merely a question between late September and early October.

He had plenty to say.

Great heat, always possible in September, was bad for theatres. And people are not all home from their holidays in September. On the other hand, in September there is less competition, and London is full of visitors. It is also a good thing to get in first. If the play caught on at all it would be in running order by the time London began to fill up with its permanent inhabitants. And again, there was always the danger of another Italian play. So far as he could find out there was nothing of the sort in the air, but you never knew. On the whole, he inclined to September.

"We're moving now, Orde," he cried ; "let's keep right on moving."

Hoffman's attitude on this question nettled Orde. This fellow took a little too much for granted. He seemed to think that he had only to say "autumn production" and an autumn production would follow as a matter of course. He really had no notion of where he stood in this business. He might be running the show, the way he talked.

Michael was continually irritating Orde by his assumptions and his impatience. The truth is that during the past two months he had grown to regard Orde simply as a convenience, a useful person who provided the words and money for his play, but was otherwise of no importance whatever. At the beginning of their collaboration he had been sufficiently impatient of Orde's opinions and arguments, but he had always met them with opinions, if not arguments, of his own. He had recognised that Orde was entitled, at any rate, to express his ideas if he wished. Orde was putting up the money ; Orde was writing the book ; Orde was a person who could not altogether be left out of calculations.

But as time went on Orde's views had seemed to decrease steadily in importance. Less and less had he combated the suggestions that were made to him. More and more had he appeared to esteem the judgment of his collaborator. In May, to be sure, he had had a few rotten ideas, which he sometimes advanced ; but by July he had fallen, after a most satisfactory fashion, into the excellent habit of leaving his thinking to somebody else. Michael had come to regard that on which he himself determined as done ;

if he took Orde into his confidence at all, it was only because Orde's pen was necessary. Michael's superb belief in his own powers, the scorn he felt for Orde, the paying artist, united during those two months with Orde's deliberately assumed humbleness to raise Michael quite into the clouds. He no longer strode about the room heatedly contesting objections ; he issued his commands. He grew to believe that he was conferring an unparalleled favour upon Orde by permitting him to share in this enterprise. His vision became thoroughly distorted.

He, Michael, was "IT" in the combination, of that he had no shadow of doubt. Orde fed out of his hand. Orde was a good boy. Orde was all right. But Orde didn't amount to a hill of beans. He had Orde where he wanted him . . . and so forth.

He had not always been too careful to conceal these opinions.

Hitherto Orde had suffered the intolerance of his collaborator with a smiling face. He knew that Michael was the cleverer man of the two, and for the sake of what the musician brought into their stock-pot he had restrained himself from giving any sign that he was not perfectly pleased with everything that was said to him. He allowed himself to be shouted down, to be called "my good man" and "my poor Orde," to be patted on the back when he had written much, to be bullied when he had been unprolific, and to have Michael's superiority to himself indicated in twenty different ways during an afternoon. But though he didn't forget these things, he never appeared to remark them. And the more he took in this kind, the more, naturally enough, Michael gave him.

To-day, however, he was less inclined to be domineered over than ever before. Cust's hints had worked. Orde had learned to look on Hoffman in a new way altogether, and had at last come to believe that it was a most fortunate thing that he had taken so much trouble over their contract. "A slippery fish," Cust had said.

He was now doubtful of Hoffman as well as irritated by him, and his discretion gave way.

"It's all very fine," he said, "to say that we've got to produce in the autumn, and to tell me to keep on moving,

and so forth ; but I may remind you, Hoffman, that I'm risking a good deal of money over this play. I want to be quite sure of what I'm doing. I tell you I don't feel confident that we can get ready by the autumn. You just say, 'Keep moving.' That's not argument, Hoffman."

Michael condescended to give his reasons all over again. He lowered his tone a trifle, too. Orde's obstinacy annoyed him, but he perceived that he had been a little too hard on the man. Dash it all ! he mustn't forget that Orde had a right to expect himself to be considered a little. After all, he was the banker of the concern.

"Well," said Orde, when he had done; "you may be right. I dare say it can be done, and if it can I'm willing. I don't want to delay any more than you do. And Cust says that it can be done." He seemed to drop this quite casually into the discussion, but he was curious to hear what Hoffman would say to it.

Michael stopped his prowling on the carpet. "Cust ?" he said.

"Yes," said Orde, "Cust. The agent, you know. I ran into him this morning, and I asked him what he thought."

Michael considered this a while ; then he said : "I say, Orde, you weren't thinking of getting Cust to do anything for us, were you—in the way of management, I mean ?"

"Why ?" said Orde. Here was just what he had been told to expect. His vague suspicions of Michael were strengthened all of a sudden.

"Oh, nothing," said Michael. "Only he's not a man I care much about. Cust's a fussy sort of fool. He don't run his own business very well, I think, and I shouldn't care to have him run mine."

"Ours," said Orde, correcting him. Cust was right. Hoffman didn't want to deal with him at all.

"Oh, ours, of course. Ours as much as you like," said Michael. "Yours if you like, old man."

He thought Orde a touchy idiot. Orde thought him an overbearing ass.

"Well," said Orde, "I have always found Cust a very civil fellow and quite up to his job."

Now Orde had never done any business with Cust.

"Take it from me, my dear man," said Michael, "that he isn't."

Orde reflected that he was taking almost too much from Hoffman. Suddenly he resolved to employ Cust. It would do no harm to have a manager who understood the slippery character of Hoffman. Moreover, he was damned if he was going to have Hoffman dictate to him as to who should and who should not be engaged to run the show!

"That's a matter of opinion," he said. "He succeeds in doing a pretty big business, anyhow."

"Anyhow!" cried Michael. "Yes, and that's just *how* he does it. The Lord knows why people go on going to him. He's no earthly use. And he never was, so far as I can hear. Cust's position's a mystery, but the profession's full of that kind of mystery."

"Well," said Orde, "I'm sorry you feel that way, because, as a matter of fact, I *did* think of getting him to do my business for me."

"Don't," said Michael. "There's half a dozen men I could tell you of that are better than Cust. I don't want Cust a little bit. He's just a bungler. Ask anyone you please. Why, it's notorious. People just laugh at Cust. 'Poor old Cust,' they say. Yet the fellow goes on as gaily as ever."

"All right," said Orde; "since you're so strong upon it, perhaps I'll get someone else. I'm sorry now I told him the plot," he added, as if it was a matter of no importance whatever. Of course he had not told Cust the plot: Orde was much too cautious to do a silly thing like that.

"You told him the plot?" Michael cried. "Good God! You told George Cust the plot of my play."

"Well," Orde admitted, rejoicing, "I couldn't very well explain how much we'd done without saying something about the plot, could I?" Yet he had done so quite easily.

"Oh, how the devil should *I* know?" cried Michael angrily. "I suppose you told him it was laid in Capri."

"Yes," Orde lied with admirable hesitation.

Michael groaned aloud. "All right," he said; "since it's done, it's done, and there's no more to be said. But, Orde, you've got to take Cust on to manage now. If you

don't, he'll steal that idea before the week's out." Michael supposed that there was not a playwright in London who would not give Cust a thousand pounds down for the plot of "The Conspiracy at Capri." There is nothing like the invention of a play for warping a judgment, sound hitherto upon the value of plots.

Orde did not smile. He expressed the greatest possible contrition for what he was supposed to have done. He pooh-poohed Michael's fears for the safety of their plot. He said Cust wouldn't do a thing like that. But Michael would listen to none of it. His one desire now was to know Cust engaged for the play. He was certain that by no other means could the agent be restrained from dealing them a fatal blow. He was so eager and anxious that he infected Orde himself, who at last began to believe that he might have parted with more information than he supposed. No work was done that afternoon. Instead, Orde was dispatched in a cab to make certain of Cust and of Cust's silence.

CHAPTER XIX

ON that Monday Linda put off her evil moment until she and Psyche were in the den after luncheon, for she wished Psyche to be in as good a temper as possible when the blow fell. Once the girl was thoroughly fed, however, there was no purpose to be served by delay. In the course of the past week Linda had become very weary of the matter which obsessed her companion's mind. The sooner on all counts the thing was done, once and for all, the better for both of them.

She said : " I saw Mr. Hoffman yesterday."

Psyche uncurled herself from the corner of the sofa like a steel ribbon that has been coiled and released. She fell forward on the arm, her chin on her folded hands. " Well ? " she gasped.

" I'm sorry——" Linda began.

Psyche sat up. " He won't ? " she cried.

Linda shook her head. " I'm afraid not," she said. " You see, it's just a matter of principle with him."

Linda had given some consideration to the manner in which she was to break her news. Some people don't mind hurting other people in the least. Linda hated doing it. To tell Psyche plainly that she didn't sing well enough to please Michael, though a simple method, was one from which she shrank ; but Michael had provided her with an alternative. That by employing it she must depart a little from the truth gave her no concern at all. A needless truth that gives pain was in her sight a very much worse thing than a lie which spares it.

With some pride in her own tact, she resolved to endow Michael with a lofty and uncompromising hatred of all jobbery and influence, to exhibit him, not laughing at, but

shrinking in horror from Psyche's proposal ; to make it a matter of principle. This shows, of course, that Linda was not the best judge of character in the world. To reason upon such lines with an elemental person like Psyche is so much waste of breath. The slap in the face which Linda sought to avoid might have succeeded ; but all talk of principle was beside the mark. Linda, however, had a soft heart and took the consequences.

She had, moreover, some ground for her invention. Michael, like nearly everybody else, hated jobbery, so long as it was found to work against him, and hitherto it had so been found. Had he ever been in the way of profiting by a job he might have seen the thing in another light. But to Linda he had often condemned the practice of allowing friendship to enter into business. And had he not at Haslemere pointed out that to job Psyche into the play would be to tie his hands against all similar attempts on the part of other people ? With so much material Linda was prepared to construct her picture of an incorruptible and virtuous Michael, not to be induced by any means to show favour to anybody in any circumstances, except on the score of merit.

She developed all this while Psyche, in her toy-jacket and petticoat trousers, sat cross-legged on the sofa, silent, thunderously frowning, pulling savagely at her hookah.

"It's just a matter of principle with him," Linda said. "That's all. Some men are like that. They loathe any kind of jobbery. It's no good arguing with a principle. It's there or it isn't there. You can't change it. I think Michael would rather see his play fail altogether than owe success to anybody's influence. And it's the same with giving people parts in it. He won't raise a finger to get anyone a place simply because he knows them. Michael's a dear, of course, and as kind as kind ; but on some points he's just like rock. You can't move him, Psyche. I know he's sorry, and I'm sorry too, but I'm afraid it's no use your hoping that he'll help you."

"The mistake I made," said Psyche in her most unpleasant voice, "was supposing that *you* would help me."

"What on earth do you mean ?" Linda demanded.

"Why, simply that you never asked him."

"I did," cried Linda outraged.

"You lie!" said Psyche furiously.

"My dear child—" Linda began. "Don't let us quarrel."

"Oh, go to the devil!" Psyche cried, uncurling herself and jumping to the floor. Her eyes were monstrous with anger. Her face was red. Her voice had suddenly grown coarse. "Why shouldn't we quarrel, I should like to know? I've no use for friends like you." She was walking quickly about the floor, biting her lips, tearing at her hand-kerchief. Her breast heaved tempestuously. She was clearly working herself up for a horrid outburst.

Linda thought well to leave her before it should come. She got up. "Very good," she said, and began to move towards the door. Psyche jumped into her path, facing her, minute but appalling. Her beautiful face was twisted with rage into very ugliness.

"No, you don't!" she shouted; "not till you've heard what I've got to say to you, you beast."

For a moment the hate which blazed in her eyes gave Linda a sensation of sheer terror. She shrank back in alarm. Psyche sprang to the door, locked it, and turned with a loud laugh of triumph. "There!" she cried, brandishing the key. "Now you've got to listen."

Linda, shrugging her shoulders, went back to her seat. It was her only possible course. Psyche must play her scene out before anything more could be done.

"Now," said the girl, coming towards her, "I'm going to tell you what I think of you. See?"

"Go on, then," said Linda. Her only wish was to reach the end of this.

Psyche stood for a moment considering, perhaps, what she should say; perhaps getting her breath. It is quite certain that, angry though she was, she did not forget to try to be as effective as possible, and breath for a tirade is no less vital for effect than the choice of words.

"Of course you never asked him," she said at last scornfully. "And you expect me to believe that he refused because of his principles. I say, Linda, you must think me a chump. As if any man'd let his principles get in his way with a good thing, and that's me. Hoffman'd only

be too jolly glad to get me. Oh ! you might think I was a kid. You might think I'd never looked in a glass. Do you fancy I don't *know* I'm pretty ? Do you ? " she stamped her foot. " Do you ? Speak, can't you ? "

Linda kept her mouth shut. Whatever happened she did not mean to wrangle.

" All right," Psyche went on, " be dumb, if you please. I'll do the talking all right. Why, you *must* be a fool to suppose I'd swallow any old tale *you* care to pitch. You should have got a better one, my dear, that's what you ought to have done. Why, any manager in London would jump at me, and you want me to believe that a second-rate musician like Hoffman's going to turn me down because he's got principles. Hah ! It's funny ! I tell you you never asked him. Eh ? Can you say you did ? "

" I have said so."

" Yes, I know you have. I only wanted to see if you could tell a lie *and* stick to it. Well, I say you didn't. What then ? "

" Nothing more," said Linda.

Psyche laughed aloud. " Oh, you're mistaken. There's plenty more. It's coming now, and you're going to hear it."

" Well, go on," said Linda, in spite of herself. It is almost impossible to avoid the contagion of anger. " I'm not stopping you," she said tauntingly. She knew it was a silly speech, worthy only of little quarrelling children, but out it came. Linda was no more perfect than other people.

" Thanks, very much," said Psyche, with profound sarcasm. " It's so good of you to let me speak, isn't it ? Well then, I will. I say you didn't ask him. And why ? Why didn't you ? I suppose you think I don't know. Oh, don't I ? that's all. Why, you're just jealous. You're afraid to let me come near your man again. He was too civil to me last time. I was a fool to think you'd do it. You stick to what you've got, my dear. Very wise, too. It'd be a precious long time before you'd get another. Well, I say you never asked him."

Linda succeeded this time in not answering. She felt that things were being said which could not be lightly forgotten.

"I say you never asked him," Psyche repeated, employing, with instinctive cruelty, the torture by repetition to extract a reply.

"Well," she went on, finding that no reply came, "if you won't ask him, I will. What's his address? I'll go and do it myself."

"Nonsense," said Linda. "You're foolish, Psyche."

"Not a bit. I want to know. Tell me his address so's I can find out."

"Of course," said Linda, "I'm not going to do anything of the kind."

"Why not? Well, I'll tell you. Because you're lying. You never asked him. You know he'd tell me that you didn't. That's why. You're afraid, and if you're not lying you needn't be. It'll be only one more sermon I'll get. But he won't talk about his principles to *me*, and you know it. And *he* won't tell me to go and take lessons."

"He did," said Linda incautiously.

"He did *not*," Psyche shouted. "He said that if I took lessons I'd be very good. Oh! I don't forget what he said. But that's not telling me that I'm not good enough for his play *without* lessons. That's what *you* think. But how do you know I'll think his play good enough for *me*? Eh? Eh?"

Linda smiled, because she was getting very angry.

"That's right," cried Psyche, "grin, do! Oh, *I* know what you think! If *you* had the choice of the cast you'd turn down Lily Elsie for the chorus and the Archangel Gabriel, if he applied, to play trumpet in the orchestra. Do you think I'd trouble about Hoffman if I knew anyone else in the business? Who's Hoffman? Nobody at all. Like as not his old play'll never get put on." She paused for breath.

"It's going to be produced this autumn," said Linda, suddenly wrathful. Perhaps if she had not been so anxious to defend Michael she would not have been so positive.

"This autumn?" Psyche cried aghast.

"Yes," said Linda.

"Very good," said Psyche, after a moment's thought; "then what's his address?"

"It's no use, Psyche," said Linda, "I won't tell you. I'm not going to have you worrying him about this thing."

"Oh," cried Psyche passionately, "that's a bit too good! You won't have me worrying him, won't you? A precious lot of worry he'd think it, wouldn't he? And you know it. You're afraid to let me see him. First of all, you'd be found out; and second, you're in love with him and don't mean to take any risks."

"This is silly," said Linda.

"It is, is it? Well, it's a dare. If you're not afraid, tell me his address."

"You can believe me or not, just as you please," said Linda. "But you can't get into this play, and it's no good your hoping to do it any longer."

"Oh, I can't. You say that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good! Well, we'll see about that. That's another dare. What's his address?"

The stupid iteration maddened Linda. "Oh, be quiet," she cried; "I'm not going to tell you."

"All right, don't. Do you think I can't find out? I suppose you've never heard of private detectives? Well, I have. I read the divorce cases if *you* don't, my pure-minded saint. Oh, I can do without you, Linda; don't you worry yourself. You're not the only guide to Hoffman. There are others." She put out her tongue rudely, delighted at her small triumph. "I'm not so silly as I look-look," she said. "Why, I'll have his address in three days, and then we'll see if you can stop me seeing him. You can tell him that I'm going to do it, if you like. But I shouldn't if I was you. He'd be on the look-out for me, you know; and he mightn't run away, either. You think he's your property, don't you? Well, I wouldn't be too sure of that. I dare say I don't know much, but I know what one kind of look in a man's eye means. Oh, it would be rather fun to cut you out! But don't be afraid I don't want him. You can keep him."

Here Linda, for all her irritation and disgust, laughed.

Psyche fairly screamed. "Oh!" she burst out, "you think that's funny, do you? I wouldn't be too sure.

Don't you dare me ; it's dangerous. You've dared me to get into that play, and I'll do it ; and you've dared me to find Hoffman, and I'll do *it*. Don't you dare me to take him away from you. Gee ! To hear you one'd think you were somebody. Now, will you tell me his address, or must I find it out ? But you'll be sorry if you make me." She threw herself on the sofa, panting, and for the moment exhausted.

" Psyche," said Linda patiently, " don't be a little fool. I suppose you can find Michael's address if you really mean to. But I shouldn't try if I were you. You won't enjoy your interview. I suppose I'd better tell you the truth."

" Ah," said Psyche, " I thought as much. That *was* a lie then. You *didn't* ask him ? "

" Oh yes, I did," Linda replied. " But he didn't refuse because of his principles, at least not altogether. I didn't want to tell you, but the fact is he doesn't think you good enough for his play."

" It's a damn lie ! You never asked him."

" I've told you now," said Linda.

" Yes, you have. And I don't believe you. Oh ! what's his address ? " Psyche cried, bursting into tears and kicking madly at the sofa. " Tell me his address, you pig ! I want his address. I want it ? I want it, I tell you ! Give it me ! I *will* have it ! "

" No," said Linda.

For some time there was silence between them. All at once Psyche ceased her sobbing and sat up, mopping her face with her handkerchief. " Linda," she said, " I'm sorry. I've been a beast. I'm a little idiot, aren't I ? Of course I see why you won't let me go."

This sudden change in the weather surprised Linda and pleased her. After all, the girl was not much more than a child ; she was entirely spoiled ; she was not to be held responsible for the things she said in her tempers. Linda got up and went over to the sofa, sat down by Psyche and put her arm round her. " That's better," she said. " Don't let's quarrel."

Psyche, smiling tearfully up into her face, snuggled into her shoulder. Linda felt that the reconciliation was to

be as complete as the rupture had been sudden. All her hard thoughts of Psyche vanished.

"I ought to have seen," Psyche murmured, "but I'm such an ignorant little fool. Of course it wouldn't be respectable for me to call on him, would it?"

Linda just prevented herself from laughing again. "Well," she said soothingly, "it wouldn't, would it?" So long as Psyche meant to abandon this plan of hers it hardly mattered whether she had or had not guessed the true reason of Linda's unwillingness to help it.

"I'm too young," Psyche continued reflectively, "to go and see men in their rooms, or to have them come to see me in mine. That's it, of course. By the way, Linda," she cooed, looking up with large, curious, innocent eyes, "at what age *does* that sort of thing become respectable for girls? One has to be quite old, eh? What's *your* age, for instance, darling Linda?" she concluded, allowing a horrid malice to appear in her voice.

"Oh!" said Linda, withdrawing her arm and getting up quickly from the sofa.

Psyche burst into a shrieking crow of triumph. "I suppose," she cried as she lay back on the sofa wriggling with joy, "that one has to be at least *your* age to have young men at one's flat, hasn't one? At night, anyhow!"

She threw herself about, laughing hysterically. Very rarely had she made such a score. When her contortions at last ceased she lay, exhausted with merriment, her face on the crook of one arm, the other straight along the back of the sofa.

Linda stood looking down upon these demonstrations with a rather hard smile on her lips. She knew now that there was no more to be done with Psyche. It was finished.

The girl's words hurt much less than her act, but they hurt horribly.

Linda had never forgotten that terrible minute in the flat while Psyche beat on the door, and she and Michael, within, cowered and avoided each other's eyes. But the danger over, she had done her best to dismiss the incident from her memory. She and Michael had been foolish, they had had their fright, and no more risks of the kind were to be run. But she had not forgotten, nor had

Michael. Yesterday, for example, he had accompanied her no further than the street door of Adelaide Buildings, and it had not been necessary for him to explain why he left her there. The danger was over, never to be revived.

And now here it was again. And whereas, at the flat, the thing they dreaded had only seemed imminent, now it was happening. Linda perceived that here was the World, in the person of Psyche, actually pointing the finger of scorn at her, actually crying out infamous things at her, picking up stones to stone her withal. The world was quite wrong, but a sense of innocence is a poor defence against stone-throwing. Stones go right through it, and strike and cut. If they are not to hurt, a sense of innocence is not enough. A triumphant and joyful exaltation must possess the soul, a gladness in the persecution, some tremendous cause must be at stake. I fancy religious passion is the only anæsthetic for stone-throwing.

Now Linda felt no religious passion about her reception of Michael at the flat. She only knew that they had been very foolish. That they loved, that to-day they were pledged, made no difference. Still, she shuddered at the very thought of her escape. Perhaps more than ever did she fear a scandal now, because so soon she was to be his wife. For that very reason the opinion of the world seemed to have become a thing of tremendous significance.

Suddenly she wanted to be no longer in the same room with Psyche. Therefore it was with some satisfaction that her eyes fell, now, upon the key of the den which Psyche clutched in one hand. Linda pounced upon it silently, wrenched it out of the weak fingers, and was across the room before Psyche knew what had happened. The poor girl had supposed that she was going to be beaten, and had been really terrified. During that hot second or two she had bitterly regretted what she had said. As soon as she found that Linda was only going to unlock the door she was again glad that she had said it.

"All right," she called from the sofa, "you can go now. I've said my say."

Linda never even looked at her ; she was too busy fitting the key into the lock. When at last she had turned it and opened the door, she simply hurried out of the room.

By the hall clock she saw that she had nearly half an hour to fill before she must return to the study. It never occurred to her to abandon her employment ; she wanted the money. Because Psyche had become unpleasant, it was not necessary to break with Mr. Whittaker. It was possible, of course, that Psyche's malice might prompt her to tell tales to her father, in which case that respectable man might very likely think it necessary to get a new reader ; but until this actually happened Linda proposed to earn her living at Pontefract Terrace. Her voice, of course, must discover the need of midday repose ; a new arrangement must be made about luncheon ; but all that was for later on. At present Linda's only real need was to get out of the house which contained Psyche. She opened the front door and, hatless, passed out into a fresher air.

CHAPTER XX

I

AFTER Linda had gone Psyche lay for some time quite still, staring at the door and smiling. She had given that Linda one for herself, by Jove ! She was intensely pleased with the way the punishment had been administered. It was neat that, very neat.

Presently she rolled out of the sofa and went across the room to a table, from which she picked up a newspaper. It was open at the law reports. She busied herself with the column devoted to Probate, Admiralty, and Divorce cases. Soon she found what she wanted, a witness's name. "Sutton," she said, "that's it. Ambrose Sutton. Good old Ambrose ! "

She went into the hall and began to search in the telephone directory. She gave a little satisfied exclamation, repeated a number aloud twice to fix it in her memory, and lifted the receiver from its hook. Two minutes later she had made an appointment for half-past three with Mr. Ambrose Sutton, Private Enquiry Agent, of St. Bride's Buildings, Ludgate Circus. There was no time to be lost, and she ran upstairs, humming a tune. She was trying to pretend that she was not at all nervous at the prospect of encountering Mr. Sutton. The novels from which most of her information was derived had led her to suppose that private detectives were rather dangerous people. They were apt to blackmail their clients. She promised herself that she would be very careful not to let this Sutton find out who she was.

She began her toilet for her journey by seeking out her

longest and thickest veil. It was a black motoring veil. Psyche never rode in motor-cars, but this veil had taken her fancy in a shop. It was one of those innumerable useless things which her abundant allowance enabled her to buy. Now it was to prove useful.

She dressed herself as quietly as her wardrobe would permit, swathed her head and face impenetrably in black chiffon, and descended into the hall. At the door she had a thought. She took the cab-whistle from its hook and popped it into her hand-bag. Private detectives were dangerous people.

A mighty sense of adventure travelled with her in the taxi-cab all the way to Ludgate Circus. Here she alighted and stared into Messrs. Cook's window until she was sure that her cab had gone well away. In the glass of the window she watched it go. She felt intensely acute and wide-awake, and equal to any emergency.

A civil constable directed her to St. Bride's Buildings ; he pitied her for the disfigurement which made necessary so thick a veil. An uninterested lift-boy hoisted her to the third storey and directed her to Mr. Sutton's offices. That lift-boy had held his job two years, and had long ago ceased to be intrigued by the clients of Mr. Sutton, let them veil themselves never so heavily.

Psyche, imagining that the world stood still to watch her, knocked upon Mr. Sutton's door and was desired loudly to enter. She found herself in the presence of a pale, small old man, who in a kind voice asked her business. Psyche came near and whispered that she had an appointment with Mr. Sutton for half-past three. "Henry," said the old man, "lady to see Mr. Sutton by appointment." A door was heard to open and close. A little murmur of talk followed. Then a door just behind her opened and, as she jumped, a voice said, "Step this way, madam, if you please." Turning round she discovered a youth who held the door for her. She went into a room, her heart beating fiercely. As she moved she slipped the catch of her hand-bag and made sure that the cab-whistle was inside.

Mr. Sutton proved to be a gentleman of middle age, tall, broad, and frock-coated. A fine curl rose above his brow. He sat very erect in his chair at a table which was covered

with papers. As Psyche came in he stuck a pen behind his ear and, leaning forward, courteously invited her to a chair. Psyche could observe no effect wrought upon Mr. Sutton by her veiled condition, and she was strongly disappointed. For a moment she was tempted to throw back the veil dramatically, if only to arouse some spark of interest in Mr. Sutton's dull eyes, but caution prevailed over pique and she sat down, still impenetrable.

Mr. Sutton said briskly, "And what can I do for you, miss?"

Psyche spoke in a low voice, a disguised voice, you are to understand. "I want you to find me the address of a—of a—" she hesitated. Was Hoffman a gentleman or only a young man? She did not care about calling him a young man—it would sound so servant-like. Mr. Sutton helped her.

"Of a gentleman, perhaps?" he said encouragingly.

"Yes," said Psyche. She drew from her hand-bag a small scent-bottle and applied it to her nostrils under the veil. She felt that she ought to show emotion at this point.

"Name?" said Mr. Sutton, whipping his pen from behind his ear.

"Hoffman," murmured Psyche. "Michael Hoffman."

Mr. Sutton wrote on a sheet of paper.

"What's he done?" Mr. Sutton asked. "I mean, is he known to the police?"

"Good heavens, no!" cried Psyche. "What a very low question!" she thought.

"Well, then," said Mr. Sutton, "what's he *do*?"

"He's a composer. He writes music, you know."

"What's he like?" asked Mr. Sutton, scribbling. Psyche described Michael as well as she could.

Then Mr. Sutton said: "Where did he live *last*?"

Psyche said that she didn't know.

"Is he in London, d'you think?" asked Mr. Sutton.

"Yes, I believe so. But I don't know," she confessed.

"Who's his publishers?"

"I don't know that, either. I don't think he's published anything yet."

"Well," said Mr. Sutton, "what *do* you know about him, miss? Come!"

"I only know that he's writing an opera. That's why I know he's in London. He's very busy with his work."

"Ah! a theatrical. That's better. Do you know what he's done in the theatrical line? I mean, has he conducted at any of the theatres, for instance?"

"I don't know." Psyche began to feel that she was making rather a poor appearance. A veiled lady who calls on a private detective upon a business so romantic and delicate as the discovery of a gentleman's address ought surely to be a little better acquainted with that gentleman's history.

"We might try the dramatic agents, though," said Mr. Sutton reflectively. "They're not easy, but we might try 'em. Who's this gent working at his opera with? Is there a nauthor of it, I mean?"

"Yes," said Psyche eagerly. "A Mr. Orde—Mr. Bertram Orde." She knew that much, at any rate.

"Orde? Orde?" said Mr. Sutton. "Don't know the name. What's *he* do?"

"I think he doesn't do anything. He's just a rich young man."

"London man?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Ah!" said Mr. Sutton. He seized the telephone which stood in front of him and spoke rapidly into it. "Look up Orde—Bertram Orde—in the telephone book. Be sharp. O for Oscar, R for Richard, D for Dora, E for Edith—Orde."

Presently, "What's that?" he said. "De Courcey Mansions, Kensington. Right." He hung up the receiver and made a new note.

"He's the only Bertram Orde in the book," he said. "He'll be the man. All right, miss," he said, "I expect I can find your gent for you. Shall we say the day after to-morrow? You come here, and if I've anythink for you you shall have it."

Psyche felt that she was being invited to go away and interfere no longer between Mr. Sutton and more important matters. She got up.

"That," said Mr. Sutton, "will be one guinea, miss. Another on Wednesday if I've got what you want. Will that be right, miss?"

Psyche only wanted to be gone. She had never felt quite so unsuccessful. She opened her hand-bag and was careful to hold it so that Mr. Sutton's eyes should not fall upon the cab-whistle. She gave Mr. Sutton his fee.

Mr. Sutton smote a bell on the table and the junior clerk appeared.

"Henry," said Mr. Sutton, "show the lady out."

Psyche was shown out, very civilly, by the junior clerk. She avoided the lift and walked down the stairs.

On the staircase she removed her veil. She hated the stuffy, beastly thing. And to think that she had been afraid of that odious, common man! Little fool that she was!

II

When she got home she changed into other clothes, having nothing else to do, and bored herself with a novel till six o'clock came near. Then she went into the dining-room and waited for Linda to leave the house. Several times she had been tempted by the thought of the magnificent scene which she could make by accusing Linda to her father of being an immoral person—in Linda's presence. But she restrained herself. A thing like that would be better done when Linda should be gone. It would have the whole night to sink in. Psyche made no doubt that in the morning Linda would be discharged; she must be.

A minute or two after half-past six Linda appeared on the path which led to the road from the servants' and tradesmen's door. Linda, it appeared, dared not risk encountering

her injured friend in the hall. The choice of exit pleased Psyche. It made her feel powerful, formidable.

Instantly she was running downstairs.

She knocked on the study door and went in to find her father on the sofa, just composing himself for the sleep which he always took between Linda's departure and the arrival of Anthony, at eight, with his dinner.

"Please, father," she said, "may I speak to you?"

He turned his head peevishly, and "No," he said, "you may not. I have to rest just now, as you know. Come again if you want to say anything."

"No," she said, "I must tell you now. I can't breathe so long as I haven't told you. Please, father, will you give orders that Miss Brook is not to lunch with me any more?"

"I was going to do so this evening," he said. "She tells me that she prefers it."

"She does?" cried Psyche. It had not occurred to her that Linda would do this. It was very intolerable impudence. "That's pretty good," she went on. "Why, she knows I wouldn't sit down at the same table with her again on any account. It's that I wanted to tell you, father."

"Psyche," he said, "I do not propose to hear any accusations against Miss Brook. What she does when she is not in this room is no concern of mine. She may lunch where and with whom she pleases. If you have made yourself unbearable to her, I applaud her choice to be solitary."

"Me!" shrieked Psyche. "Oh, this is a bit too thick! If you knew what she is you wouldn't talk that way. Shall I tell you what she is?"

"No," said Mr. Whittaker, "and I wish you to leave me this moment. I have a headache. It has been a hard day."

"Well," his daughter continued, disregarding his wishes as if they had not been spoken, "I'll tell you what she is. She's—" The word she wanted to use stuck in her throat, for Psyche still found certain things difficult to say. As for this one, it was impossible. "I mean," she substituted, "you ought to know how she goes on."

"Indeed," he said, "I wish to know nothing of the

kind. Miss Brook does her work here satisfactorily ; I have no concern with what she does elsewhere."

"Well," said Psyche virtuously, "you ought to have. She's a wicked woman." This was a compromise, and ineffective, but it served. Psyche could have bitten herself for her inability to pronounce the word she had attempted. That would have made him sit up a bit.

"I tell you," he said in a long-suffering voice, "that this is no concern of mine. Nor is it of yours."

"You don't believe me, eh ?" cried Psyche. "Very well, then ; what do you say to this ? I called on her the other evening and there was a man in her flat !"

"Very possibly," said Mr. Whittaker. "There may have been a dozen. What does it matter ? I don't want to hear about it. You are a fool, Psyche. I am pleased to find you so virtuous, but you are a fool. If you don't want to be shocked don't call on Miss Brook at her flat ; but, for Heaven's sake"—his voice became shrill with annoyance—"don't come to me with silly tales of this kind again."

Psyche was horrified. By this time she had almost persuaded herself that Linda's guilt was a fact. It staggered her to find her father taking the matter so coolly. She could only gasp and go. She absolutely hastened from the neighbourhood of this fearfully wicked old man.

Mr. Whittaker was much relieved by her departure. He turned on his side and was soon asleep. Psyche did not even amuse him.

III

Till Wednesday, then, there was no more to be done.

All through Tuesday Psyche played the piano, daubed at her easel, ate chocolates, smoked her hookah, and

otherwise distracted her dreadful leisure: She restored Eliza to the dining-room at lunch-time, having positive need of a companion; but Eliza bored, and was sent packing.

Linda lunched downstairs in a room that was called the breakfast-room, and was used for the storage of many things which were not wanted elsewhere. Linda went directly to this room from the study by way of the kitchen stairs. After eating she went out by the side-door of the house and sat in Hyde Park till her vocation called her back. Thus the two girls saw nothing of one another all day.

Mr. Whittaker, on the previous evening, had made no comment upon Linda's request for solitude, in future, while she lunched. She had begun to explain that her voice—but he had held up a hand. "You shall lunch alone, Miss Brook," he said; "that is enough. Proceed, Miss Brook." He did not want to know anything about his reader's voice. It might have caused him anxiety. The man spared himself as much as he could.

Psyche spent a very dull day.

IV

On Wednesday she killed time till three o'clock, and then took a cab to St. Bride's Buildings. It is to be remarked that, though she again veiled herself, she left the cab-whistle on its hook.

Mr. Sutton received her with a satisfied smile. He took a folded piece of paper from a drawer and held it out to her.

"This," he said, "is yours, miss"—here he pulled it back from her outstretched hand—"for a guinea," he concluded.

While she found the money he continued: "A most

simple matter, you see. I make no mysteries for my clients. A man was put on to watch Mr. Orde's premises. A gentleman corresponding to your description came out within half an hour. He was followed home. An inquiry of his landlady was enough. Thank you ; " and he took his fee. " Here is the address." He rang his bell. " Always happy to serve you similar at any future time, miss." Henry appeared. " Show the lady out, Henry," said Mr. Sutton, and Psyche was once more on the landing.

A most business-like and capable fellow, Mr. Sutton.

She examined her paper. On it were two lines of type-writing :

" 203 Gulliver Street,
" Camden Town."

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN her heart was set on any object Psyche let no grass grow between her toes while she made her way towards it. She was hardly in the street before she was hailing a cab.

Twenty minutes later she found herself in a mean street, halted before a mean house. Above its door was the number 203. Psyche was quite horrified by her surroundings, but, with a stout heart, persisted.

A frowsy old woman answered the bell. Psyche thought she had never seen a dirtier and more unpleasant-looking person.

"This Mr. Hoffman's place?" she inquired loftily.

"He lives 'ere," said the other, "if that's wot you mean."

"I want to see him," said Psyche. "Is he in?"

"Thir' floor," said Michael's landlady, with admirable economy of breath and words. She turned her back on Psyche and went down the passage. She was a busy old woman. Psyche was so furious that she almost resolved to go away. Then she went up the stairs, avoiding the touch of the walls and holding her skirts high; she had not come so far to turn back now. But it was a dreadful place, worse even than Linda's. She was glad it was not in the evening that she had come here.

She mounted to the third storey and stood on a small landing. A door faced her; another was at her side. She paused, wondering which she should try.

All at once, behind the door which faced her, Michael began to play on his piano and to sing the chorus entrance in the second act, where the populace of Capri, admitted in honour of the prince's arrival, to the palace grounds,

announced its intention of profiting by their ruler's kindness.

" Scatter orange peel and paper,
Paper brown and paper white,
Cut up every kind of caper,
Set the shrubberies alight.
Make the most of sunny hours,
Tread the grass, uproot the flowers,
Cigarette-ends strew in showers,
Stone the ducks with all your might."

Psyche was civil enough to wait until the verse was ended, then she rapped sharply. Michael went on singing :

" Steal the peaches from the green'us,
Break the glass if locked the door,
Cut your names upon the Venus—"

Here Psyche, losing patience, began to hammer. The music ceased, and Michael cried angrily : " Come in, and stop that infernal row."

Psyche asked for nothing better. In she went and found Hoffman glaring savagely at her over the top of a grand piano. He wore his shabby dressing-gown, he had no collar on, and his chin was sadly in need of a shave. He did not move, but the anger died out of his eyes and gave place to amazement. " Good God !" he cried.

" I'm afraid I'm interrupting you," said Psyche, sweet as honey. She proposed to be very amiable.

" You are," he said, " I won't deny it. It's Miss Whitaker, isn't it ? " This annoyed Psyche—she expected to be remembered without question, when once she had been seen—but her voice didn't show it.

" Yes," she said. " That's me. I'll bet you're surprised to see me here."

" I am," he said. " May I ask what you want ? "

He supposed that the girl had come personally to extort from him a promise to visit her den again. Though he and Linda saw each other every evening now, Linda had not thought it worth while to warn him of Psyche's threat to ask him for a part in the " Conspiracy at Capri." She

had not for a moment believed that Psyche could or would do it. She had not even told him of her quarrel with the girl. Just now Michael's thoughts must not be disturbed by anxieties outside of his work. He would write better music, Linda believed, if he supposed that all went well at Pontefract Terrace. You may also understand that, since Sunday, she and Michael had easily found something better to talk about than Psyche.

"You'll never guess," said Psyche archly. "You'd never think that I could be so bold."

"Well," said Michael, "suppose we don't waste time in guessing. I'm rather busy, you know." He was ready to promise anything in the matter of the salon if she would only go away.

Psyche kept in her temper with both hands. "Why," she said, "of course I don't want to take up your time. I oughtn't to have come like this, breaking in on your work; I ought to have written and made a proper appointment; I know that—"

"Yes, yes," he broke in impatiently. "We all know that. But since you have come, do, my dear Miss Whitaker, please state your business. I'm composing, you know." His eyes wandered to the lyric propped before him.

"Well, then," said Psyche as she tipped a heap of music from a chair and sat down, "I will. You're producing your play pretty soon, aren't you?"

"Lord love us!" he thought. "What's this?"

"In the autumn, eh?" Psyche insisted.

"Yes," he said.

"Well, then," she said, "I'm going to be very audacious and just ask you straight out if you can find a little part for me in your play. You know, I want to go on the stage, and I thought that as you know me, you might—eh?"

Michael stared at her.

"Heavens and earth!" he was thinking. "Didn't I tell Linda I wouldn't have the girl? What's Linda been doing, then?" And "Oh," he said, "I'm afraid I can't do that." He actually began to finger the notes. He wished devoutly that she would go.

Psyche had to believe her ears. He had refused. But perhaps he misunderstood.

"Of course," she said, "you mustn't think I want a *big* part. I haven't any experience, as you know, and I don't hope to *begin* at the top. But isn't there some little part you could give me. I'm not greedy. The very littlest part'll do."

Michael became infuriated.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken about this play," he said pleasantly. "It's to be a *professional* production."

Psyche, hating him, said, "Yes, of course I know that. That's why I want to get into it. I want to go on the *stage*, you see. Now, don't say you can't, Mr. Hoffman," she went on. "Please don't say you can't. It means so much to me and it's so very little to you. I only want the tiniest part."

"What," said Michael drawling, "do you exactly mean by a little part?"

Psyche felt that he was coming round. "Why," she explained, "isn't there some pretty chambermaid in your play, some quite unimportant person with just one or two short songs and dances—you liked my dancing, you know—and perhaps one or two small scenes with the principal lady. That's the kind of thing I want."

Michael leaned back against the wall and, putting his hands in his breeches pockets, openly admired her.

"Well," he said, "I'll be shot! How long," he asked, "do you think a girl is on the stage, generally, before she's allowed to play a little tiny part like that?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Psyche. "Not long. If she can dance and sing and is good-looking—"

"If she can dance and sing *and* is good-looking she may, with luck—with great luck—play a little part like that after about two years. But most of 'em have been playing more like twenty. They begin as little children, Miss Whittaker. They're accomplished actresses at fifteen. Why, most girls are in raptures if they get three lines to say after five years of it. And you ask me for a *part*. No. No;" and he shook his head—after all, she was very pretty, and he mustn't be too hard on her—"I'm

afraid it can't be done, Miss Whittaker. I'm sorry, but it can't be done."

"Well, then," said Psyche, "I've asked too much. That's just my ignorance, Mr. Hoffman. I'd no idea that so much experience was required. I must just try to be content with a place in the chorus."

It was clear to her that he wasn't going to give her a part. It was fairly clear to her that he didn't wish to give her any place in his play. Perhaps, after all, Linda had spoken the truth, and he had some principle or other which stood in the way, though he had said nothing about it. But Psyche didn't despair yet, by any means. She meant to get into this play. The best way, she conceived, was to assume that he would put her in the chorus. This would be an easy escape for him.

"Why," said Michael, annoyed by this foolish persistence, "it takes far longer to get into the chorus. Most of them average forty years old." He was careless how she interpreted his words. "And now," he said, "suppose I get on with my work." He had used all the civility he had for her.

Psyche bit her lips to repress a furious word. He refused her; that was clear. She was beaten, and the thought maddened her. But she had one more thing to ask.

"Very well," she said with a sigh as she got up, "if you can't, you can't. But tell me, Mr. Hoffman. Is it simply because I haven't enough experience, or is it because your principles won't let you do it? I mean it'd be a bit of a job, perhaps. Is that why you won't?"

He was so weary of her that he said—for anything else seemed to promise more discussion—"Oh no! It's simply that you haven't acted before."

"Ah!" she cried, "then Linda lied. I told her so."

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, suddenly becoming animated. "Linda never lied in her life. What do you mean?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Psyche airily. "Good-bye, Mr. Hoffman."

"Stop a minute," he said. "You accused Linda of lying; you've got to explain that."

"Delighted," said Psyche. "I asked her to ask you to give me a place in your play, you see."

"Well?" said Michael.

"Well, she told me that she had, and that you'd refused."

"Well?" said Michael.

"She said that you refused because it was against your principles to give a place to friends. And now you say that you won't have me because I haven't acted before. So you see," she concluded, "Linda lied, *as I said*. She never asked you at all."

"Oh yes, she did," said Michael. "And I'll tell you what I said, since you seem to want to know. I said I wouldn't have you as a gift. God!" he cried furiously, "you'd tell me Linda's a liar, would you? You snippet! You monkey! You—why, what possessed you ever to think I'd give you a shop? What can you *do*, anyway? Can you sing? Can you dance? Can you act? Have you any one solitary qualification for doing anything but play in children's theatricals? And you'd call Linda a liar, would you? Do you happen to know that you're not fit to wipe Linda's boots. Do you happen to know that? Because if not, let me tell you so. Now, just listen. You can't sing. Remember that. You can't sing at all. You squeak loudly; your voice is a small cat's voice; you hurt people's ears. You produce your voice like the wind in a keyhole. That's how you sing. And you can't dance. Remember that. You move like one of these mechanical figures; you turn your toes up; you're ungraceful; you don't keep time; the music might be in another world." (This was unjust of Michael, but he didn't care. He wanted to wound this girl who called Linda a liar.) "That's how you dance," he cried. "I don't care how you act in the least. Very likely you're better than Bernhardt. But you're not going to show it in my play. Now, is that straight enough? Because if not I can say it all over again in ten different ways. And next time—here's a tip for you—next time you want a shop, don't tell the man you want to give it you that the girl he—that Linda's a liar. And now you can go." He sat down again at the piano and began to play on it loudly.

It was impossible for him to be too rude to Psyche.

The girl had listened to his appalling speech in perfect silence. The torrent of abuse had been altogether too much for her, for Michael's fury had been extreme. When he ceased she was white and terrified. In another moment her colour came rushing back ; he had sat down ; she was safe from personal violence. Her spirit soared aloft upon passion.

" You great beastly bully ! " she cried. " How dare you talk to me like that ! How dare you——"

Michael, glowering upon her, developed some tremendous music in the bass, and Psyche perceived, blind with rage though she was, that her words must be inaudible to him. Short of going up to him and yelling into his ear she could not make him listen, and she had no intention of approaching him. A contest with the piano being out of the question, an exit, as impressive as possible, became necessary. She turned her back on him and ran to the door, opened it, and swung round. Michael pounded more and more violently. She couldn't resist securing the last word, though it should never penetrate the din that he was creating about himself.

" I'll act in your old play ! " she screamed. " Do you hear ? I'll act in it. I will, I swear I will ! I'll act in your rotten old play, just to spite you ! There ! "

She put her tongue out at him ; the door slammed upon her, and Michael was alone.

" Good ! " he shouted as he thundered out his monstrous music. " She's gone, and the Lord be praised. But I fixed her. She won't worry me again. Linda a liar ! Be damned if I ever heard the like of——"

He broke off and his face changed, assuming the expression of one who listens intently. He did not stop playing, but rather smote the keys with a firmer hand.

" Why, " he cried, " there's something in this, dash my buttons if there isn't ! Gee ! That's funny. We'll have that once more."

The man was on the track of an air, discovered unexpectedly, in an instant, among the rank noise that he had been making. After half an hour of the loudest piano playing that his grumbling landlady had ever heard, he

stopped abruptly and began to write. An hour later he read through what he had done.

"Well," he said, "that's a jewel out of a muck-heap, if ever there was one. That's got to go in. But where? But where?" He pulled towards him the portfolio that held the score, as so far complete.

CHAPTER XXII

I

THE proceedings of Psyche during the next forty-eight hours need not detain us very long. Neither you nor I care about renewing our acquaintance with Mr. Ambrose Sutton. It is only necessary for me to tell you that Psyche went directly, from Michael's lodgings, back to the offices of that most convenient private inquiry man, and commissioned him to discover with all speed the name of the theatrical agent who was to manage the business of the Orde-Hoffman play, and that on the Friday afternoon a slip of paper bearing the words "Mr. George Cust, Bracegirdle Street," was handed to her by Mr. Sutton. Half an hour's work on Thursday among the bars of Maiden Lane had put Mr. Sutton's man in possession of the desired information. Psyche was quite pleased with Mr. Sutton when she left his office. Let us flit ahead of her to Bracegirdle Street.

II

For several days now Cust's office had been besieged. He was the last man in the world to publish abroad the news of his having a production in hand for the autumn.

He knew that he could get hold of his smaller people when he wanted them, and he did not wish them, before that time, to get hold of him. But though he kept silence and could rely on his clerks not to babble, he didn't hope for peace. He knew that a secret of this kind is hardly worth the effort of trying to keep it ; the wind carries it.

Orde arranged matters definitely with Cust on the Monday evening, and that night Cust's engagement was known to three persons only—Cust, Orde, and Michael. But Cust had written to three or four actors to sound them about their willingness to consider principal parts in the production.

On Tuesday afternoon six ladies and five gentlemen choristers left word for Cust (they were old hands, and didn't so much as try to see him) that they were free to take an engagement in August or September.

On Wednesday morning Cust's office was thronged, and hummed all day long with the conversation of the small fry of musical comedy. And on Thursday there was barely fainting-room in the saloon.

Nobody saw Cust. His clerks had one answer for everybody—"Mr. Cust can see no one." But the hopeful mimes did not go away. They had nowhere to go ; Cust's office was as good a place to be in as anywhere else, and there was always the chance that they might get a word with Cust as he went in and out by the private door, or now and then made a hurried sortie into the saloon. And they were all friends—more or less.

There was no matador for Cust now : he was busy enough. The choristers could hang about till he wanted them, but his principals were another affair altogether. He had a cast of twelve to collect, and of these at least six must be really good artists. Orde had given him a generous limit in the matter of salaries, and he had no fear that he could not afford good second-rate talent for those places where it was necessary. The trouble was to buy it. Even your good second-rate artist is apt to look at offers not only with a saucy but also with a shrewd eye. He wants to know first that he is likely to get his money ; secondly, that the play has the makings in it of a success ; and thirdly, that his part is to be worthy of the reputation with

which he endows himself ; and if he is a lady, he is not any less exacting, I do assure you. Of a new management he has learnt by sad experience to be extremely shy ; of a new author he is positively afraid. As for the worthiness of his part, he doesn't pretend to expect satisfaction here. He condescends to every rôle as to a mere convenience, and would grumble though he never left the stage between the first rise and the last fall of the curtain. Cust naturally looked for trouble over getting his principals.

But a manager has more to do than engage artists.

Since nine o'clock in the morning of this same Thursday Cust had been working without a second's pause, dictating letters, considering draft contracts, dashing out into the saloon to bark an order to his secretary, dashing back into his private room, dashing out three minutes later to countermand that order (which a telephonic communication had meanwhile rendered useless), calling upon his Maker to deliver him from a set of incompetent fools, smoking one cigarette after another, interviewing Orde, interviewing Michael, interviewing Burke (for Burke had been secured to produce the play), interviewing Craddock the press agent, interviewing all sorts of people—men from Wellands' the scenic artists in the Hampstead Road, men from Pocock's the costumiers, men from Huntingdon's the printers—criticising sketches, commissioning poster designs, considering and wrangling over estimates for half a dozen different things all at once (verbally with the interviewer of the moment, and by telephone with all sorts of people at all sorts of places), darting out to the Bodega, leaping into taxi-cabs, persuading some genially dubious actor that his money would be all right, or doing something else. His life at this time was the life of a hunted beast.

The people who encumbered his stairs and his saloon added nothing to his embarrassments. They were like so much cattle to him. Cust had learned altogether to disregard the noise made by his clients outside his room. If ever he had to pass among them he simply shoved.

III

When Psyche reached this poor man's office the numbers of people that she found there before her sent her heart right down into her boots. It seemed as if all the actresses in London must be after a part in Hoffman's play. This despondency quickly passed. Even as she went up the stairs her eyes were busy with her competitors, and she had not been a minute in the crowded saloon before she had decided that there was no woman present of whom, on the score of looks, she need be afraid. She was happily conscious of a sensation that she was creating, of the eyes of men that gloated upon her from every direction, of shrugs and words that passed between women, curiously and distastefully observing her. It is not often that young beauty of the Psyche quality blows in solitary among a horde of choristers. Psyche was not just an ordinary pretty girl, you understand.

Within thirty seconds of her entrance nearly everybody in the saloon was aware of her presence.

Psyche pushed her way unceremoniously through the crowd towards a glass partition in which was a little window marked "Enquiries." She tapped on the window and waited, looking about her. In the wall at her right hand she perceived a door on which was written "Private. Mr. Cust." He was in there, then. She continued to wait, staring back at the people who surrounded her, thoroughly enjoying herself. This was life at last. She was not at all shy or afraid. These people seemed a low lot, but decidedly they were Bohemians. They looked quite jolly.

She became tired of waiting for the window to open, and with the handle of her parasol rapped violently on the glass. The sudden hush which fell upon the room gave her intense pleasure. So did the burst of talk which succeeded. Psyche felt sure that everybody was discussing her.

The window opened with a jerk. Behind it sat an angry man.

"What on earth——" he began.

"I want to see Mr. Cust," she said peremptorily.

"Mr. Cust can see nobody," he said sharply. She had jarred his nerves sadly with her loud rapping.

Now for Psyche Cust was no more than a tradesman whom she proposed to patronise. She has asked for him just as she would have asked for her tailor, or a photographer. So she was prepared to wait a few minutes in case he happened to be engaged at this particular moment. There were certainly many people in the saloon, obviously waiting, but they were all very common people. They would just have to wait a little longer. She expected, however, to see Cust almost at once.

When she was told that Cust could see nobody she understood that the clerk had made a mistake. Of course, this didn't apply to her. She was about to say so, when the man suddenly threw his body back, elevated his arms high above his head, and permitted himself to yawn largely and easily. He was infinitely weary of telling people that Cust couldn't see them. As for this little whipper-snapper. . . .

His hands came down and one of them went out to close the window. At the same time his eyes dropped to her face. Instantly he leaned forward with an ingratiating smile. It was not Psyche's beauty that had worked upon him. Not at all. So many pretty faces framed themselves in his window each day that he had grown quite callous to the charms of woman. But he perceived that Psyche's face was a new one. This was no member of the Old Brigade, the legion of the Fail-me-Nevers. It was a quite new little girl, and it must be secured for the governor. Its address and name must be taken. That was simple business, ordinary routine duty.

"What name did you say, miss?" he inquired amiably.

But his yawn had challenged a quick temper. Psyche, by this time, was aflame. She stooped down, crossed her arms on the window-sill, looked very straight at the poor clerk, and said hotly:

"What do you mean by yawning in my face, confound

you ? Here, take my name in to Mr. Cust, and look sharp about it." She jerked a card at him, one of the Psyche Van Loo cards. "He'll be pleased to know," she added, "what a civil clerk he keeps."

For a moment her anger and the certainty of reception which rang in her voice paralysed the man. He seemed to shrink in his clothes. Only a salary of £100 a week could entitle a girl to talk to him in this way. Had he made the bloomer of his life ? Was this something come over from New York, with the hearts of all America in its forty trunks, to knock London sky-high in its first three minutes on the stage ? He groped feebly in his mind for a famous name to put to an unknown face. He began to stutter out some kind of apology. He picked up the card and stared at it with unseeing eyes.

Then, just as quickly, his bemused brain cleared, and he thought that he understood the situation. In his turn he became infuriated, and, "Very nice, Miss—er—Miss Van Loo," he sneered. "You worked that pretty good, didn't you ? But it can't be done. Not with me, swanky puss, not with me ! You can't see Mr. Cust. Nobody can. Come again in a fortnight's time, perhaps. And now, what's the address ? "

Psyche simply turned her back on him.

Her course was perfectly clear.

She swung round on her heels, opened Cust's private door and walked in. The actors and actresses gaped at one another. Those nearest the entrance of the saloon called out to the people in the passage to come in and see a kid fired by Cust. The affair was related, spread down the stairs. Mimes melted from the pavement of Brace-girdle Street in their anxiety to see what would happen to this extraordinary kid. The saloon became blocked with the persons of choristers.

Soon they were betting whether she would emerge into the saloon or the passage. People near the two doors of Cust's room strained their ears to hear something of that which was occurring inside ; besought silence of their neighbours. After a time amazement took the place of expectation. Then the mimes became cynical. Ladies might be seen slapping gentlemen in reproof on the arm.

IV

Cust was in a very bad temper when Psyche invaded him. He was telephoning his opinion of the manager of a type-writing office who was late with a copy of the script, as so far completed, ordered on the previous day. Cust wanted that script. A lady whom he wished to play Claudina was coming that afternoon, and she would want to see something of the part.

"If it's not here in half an hour," Cust was saying as Psyche came in, "you can keep what you've done, Mr. Riley. You can clean your razor on it, Mr. Riley. I don't want it. And you'd better understand that this'll be the last piece of work you'll get from me. You must be all asleep down there. But I'll trouble you for that MS. that you've got, whether the copy's done or not. There'll be small hell to pay, Mr. Riley, if it doesn't come, and if I have to send for it."

He hung up the receiver violently, and at the same moment became aware that a young woman was standing by the door which led into the saloon. The room was lit from the end remote from Psyche, and she was a good deal in shadow. Cust could only see that a slender female was there. He slewed his chair round, facing her. "What the devil!" he cried. "Don't you know this room's private? Get into the saloon this minute." Psyche remained where she was. "Do you hear?" he shouted, "or must I put you out by the shoulders?"

This reception fairly maddened Psyche. That first a dirty clerk and then his dirty master should use her in this way put her nearly beside herself. She stamped her foot at Cust, and, "How dare you talk to me like that?" she cried. "Are you Mr. Cust?"

"Oh yes," he said grimly, "I'm Mr. Cust all right, my precious love. Now, step lively! Outside!"

Psyche came straight up to his desk, and as the light fell upon her Cust gasped.

"Look here," she began, "I've been insulted by your man out there, but I'm not going to take it from you——"

"Lord bless us!" thought Cust. "Here's something worth the trouble of a poor man's eye. Where the deuce does *she* spring from?" He was not the most capable of agents, but he recognised beauty when he saw it. Psyche, swift to note the change that had come over his face, paused in her attack. Instinct told her that this man was going to be amiable. If so, softly was the word.

"My dear young lady," said Cust, "I must apologise for speaking as I did. You startled me. People don't as a rule come in here unless I *expect* them, you know."

"I suppose not," she said, all her wrath evaporated, "but *I* had to. Your clerk out there was rude to me. I wasn't going to stand that, so I came right in to tell you."

"Quite right, too," said Cust heartily. "I'll make him wish he had never been born—later on. But meanwhile, what can we do for you, Miss——?"

"Van Loo," said Psyche, producing a card. "I want," she said, coming straight to the point, "to act in Mr. Hoffman's play."

"Did he send you to me?" asked Cust, wondering how that poor devil Mikky Hoffman had managed to acquire an interest in this particular piece of goods.

"No," said Psyche. "He didn't. The fact is——" she paused. Then she went on boldly. "The fact is, he has refused to put me in." This difficulty had to be faced sooner or later: it was no good lying about it now. Hoffman was hostile. What she was here to do was to make Cust her friend.

Cust whistled. He was frankly amazed that a seedy merchant like Mikky should ever have had an opportunity of refusing such a girl. He leapt to the conclusion that there had been a bitter quarrel between these two. Still, he didn't quite see what her game was. Of course, if Mikky wouldn't have her he wouldn't—there was an end of it. Orde was giving Mikky a good deal of say so, far too much indeed, but there it was. Cust was sorry that Mikky had a down on this girl: she was a dashed sight

too handsome to let go simply because a man didn't care for her. She would draw the boys no end. However, that was Mikky's business. Cust began to consider what he could do with his find, apart from Hoffman's play. He was quite determined not to lose sight of her.

"Well," he said, "if he's refused I'm afraid I can't do very much, can I?"

"Can't you?" she asked. Then, taking her courage in both hands, she said: "I'll give you fifty pounds if you can."

Cust grinned. This frankness pleased him. While they had been talking his eyes had been busy with his visitor, and he had already formed his estimate of her. Psyche was not the first well-off girl who had come to see Cust on similar business, but she was the first who had put the thing to him quite so straight. "What a world of chin," he reflected, "a man'd save if they'd all come out like this."

"I'm not being funny," said Psyche. "Here!" She opened her hand-bag and produced five ten-pound notes. She threw them on the table in front of him. "There!" she said.

Cust spread them out in a neat row and gazed at them admiringly.

"Fifty pounds," he said in a reflective voice. "Eh? Well, fifty pounds is always fifty pounds. Fifty pounds is a useful little contribution to the expenses of a production." He preferred to put it in this way.

"Yes," said Psyche. It was just as he pleased. "I've no experience," she said, "and I suppose I've got to pay for it."

For a few moments neither of them spoke. Psyche waited for the effect of the handled money to sink in; Cust was considering what was best to be done.

"So you've never acted before?" he asked at last.

"Only at school," said Psyche, "but I was considered top-hole there."

"Ah," said Cust, "you were considered top-hole at school, eh? Do you *sing* at all, now?"

"Of course," said Psyche.

"Well," he said as he lit a cigarette, "sing to me. There's the piano. Sing anything."

Psyche sat down instantly and tinkled out with great spirit the first verse of "Stop your tickling, Jock." Cust understood why Hoffman had refused, though Hoffman was undoubtedly a fool. That fifty pounds was going to be pretty hard to earn against Hoffman's decision and against this paltry little pipe.

"Thank you," he said, "thank you, Miss Van Loo. That was charming."

He sat smoking and considering her for a while.

"I dance, you know," said Psyche, getting up and striking a pose in the middle of the room. She performed a pirouette.

"Well," he said, "you shall dance for me, too." He didn't expect that she could dance, but one never knew. It might be possible to bring her forward as a dancer. It might just be possible. He got up and sat at the piano. "Go ahead," he told her, and played a waltz.

Psyche danced.

"Very pretty," said Cust. He now knew that the girl's face was her only real qualification. Well, it was a strong one.

"You have talent," he said, "great talent, but I'm afraid that your voice is hardly strong enough for chorus work, Miss Van Loo, and your experience is hardly large enough for you to undertake a small part. Mr. Hoffman is very particular about the way his music is to be rendered, and quite right, of course. But, as a musician, he thinks of nothing else. He would rather have a girl with a great strong voice, though she were as ugly as a horse, than, let us say, *you* with your very sweet but not powerful organ. I think he is wrong. There is always room for beauty in a musical play. But Mr. Orde (our author) sees things in a larger way. He is giving Mr. Hoffman full power to select his artists, but I think that he might be brought to consider an exceptional case. He has a kind heart. Were he personally interested in anybody with real talent, I feel sure that he would be prepared to provide that talent with an opportunity, if it could be done without sacrificing the interests of the piece. I need hardly say that I believe that you would be an acquisition. Mr. Hoffman, however, thinks otherwise. Mr. Hoffman stands in the way. It

is no good my speaking to him. But I will consult with Mr. Orde. And now I think of it, I am lunching with Mr. Orde to-morrow. Why should not you join us? It will facilitate matters a good deal if Mr. Orde can be made personally interested in your ambition, Miss Van Loo."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Psyche, with a laugh. She understood that she was to be very charming to Orde.

"We shall expect you at the Criterion," said Cust, arranging the bank-notes in a little pile in front of him, "about one o'clock."

"Right-oh!" said Psyche. "Then it's a bet. I'm to go in."

"Oh, as to that," said Cust, "I can promise nothing. I'll do my best, naturally, for I am convinced that you would be a real acquisition. *But* there is Mr. Hoffman, you know; he will be a great difficulty. I can promise nothing." He leaned back to light a cigarette. "I can promise nothing except to do my best—my very best."

In one hand he held the parcel of notes. Psyche suddenly stepped forward, snatched her money and crammed it into her bag.

"Then I needn't worry you with these just now," she said. "Need I?"

Cust grinned as pleasantly as he could.

"Certainly not," he said, "and I was about to return them to you, Miss Van Loo. Mr. Orde would not wish any contributions to his expenses for which he was not prepared to make a proper return."

"Oh no," said Psyche, "of course not. Well, these are waiting for you—I mean for *him*, if you can bring this off. I mean, when I sign my contract."

"When you sign your contract," said Cust reflectively. "Eh?"

"Yes," said Psyche, "and these are *all*, Mr. Cust."

"Oh," said the agent, cynically resigned to her view of their agreement, "fifty'll do, my dear. I think you can trust me to earn it. But you won't make it harder than you can help for me with Mr. Orde at lunch to-morrow, will you?"

"That's understood," said Psyche. "Till to-morrow,

then," and she went out through the private door with her chin well up.

"Well, well," said Cust, "it's just as good those two boys signed their contract yesterday. Otherwise——" He whistled and turned his attention to more pressing concerns.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE voice-trial for the "Conspiracy at Capri" was held on Saturday, the twenty-first of August, at the Paganini Rooms, beginning at ten in the morning.

A chorus of fifty was to be chosen. Cust, therefore, had collected about seventy people by postcard. Of these, twenty women and ten men were practically engaged, and only waited Hoffman's approval. Cust had no fear for them; they were all competent choristers for whom he had found dozens of engagements. He began the trial with these people, the women first and then the men, and they behaved as if they had their contracts in their pockets. While they waited for their turn to sing they sat in the passages and entrance hall of the Paganini Rooms, where they could talk comfortably and loudly. They had been present at too many voice-trials to be curious about the singing and deportment of other girls, and in the Assembly Hall (where the trial took place) they could only talk in whispers, and would be subject to the annoyance of hearing Cust cry, "Silence over there, please," every three or four minutes. Several of the men abandoned the Paganini Rooms altogether and went across the road to a bar, where they spent nearly the whole morning. A "doubtful" engaged by subscription remained on the premises to tell them when all the women should have sung. When this had happened they came across to the Rooms in a body, full of beer and confidence, and puffing hard and thriftily at the cigarettes which they must now extinguish.

Most of the remaining forty—the people who were not "practically" engaged—stayed in the Assembly Hall and

made an audience for the singers. They did their best to look unconcerned and indifferent to the result of their singing, but they deceived nobody. Each knew that everybody was as anxious as himself or herself. None the less, each chorister assumed a careless pose, whistled under his breath, chewed lozenges, picked his teeth, powdered her nose, and affected surprise when his or her name was called, as if the whole thing was a bore and a form.

During the first quarter of an hour each of them explained to several others how it happened that he or she was out of a shop at this moment. Nobody believed these explanations, but all appeared to do so. When you wish other people to be polite, it is well to be polite yourself.

Nobody knew anything about the play which had brought them together, but everybody was giving information concerning it to everybody else. None of them believed what they were told.

Outside in the passages and entrance there was a loud roar of talk which, every time the door swung, burst into the Assembly Hall. Cust made no effort to stop this nuisance. His authority ended at the swing-door. But in the Assembly Hall itself silence he *would* have, and he was always looking up fiercely from his papers, darting a quelling eye into some corner where the whispering had become too noisy, or rapping his hand smartly on the table and calling for quiet.

The Assembly Hall was a place where dancing academies conducted their business, and three sides of it were furnished with two rows of red velvet benches, the back row slightly raised above the level of the floor. On these the choristers—the doubtfuls—roosted uneasily, shifting and fidgeting and swearing softly in one another's ears at the heat and the slowness of the trial, or criticising the efforts of their luckier rivals who were singing and would soon be done with it all one way or another.

Near the middle of the fourth wall were a table and several chairs, and in the centre of the room were a piano and a chair.

From the ceiling depended two huge bags of dirty linen, which protected the tarnished glories of the chandeliers.

All around were mirrors, spotted with mould, two of them cracked.

In one corner of the room was a jumbled heap of boards and trestles—the platform out of use.

At the table sat Cust, his hat jammed on his head in token of authority ; Orde, in his best tweed suit, also with his hat on, because he wished to seem thoroughly familiar with the customs of the profession ; Michael, unhatted because he found it too hot for a hat, and had never become used to sitting with his head covered while women were in the same room ; and Hutton, the little fierce assistant stage-manager. He called the names angrily, scribbled notes of the people who were to be written to, and made himself generally busy and alarming.

Near the table, rocking himself and his chair perpetually on its hind legs, sat the producer and stage-manager, Dicky Burke, an enormous fat man with large, dull-looking eyes and a prominent nose. Though Orde had had his doubts concerning the engagement of Burke, Hoffman's friend, Cust had not encouraged the idea of finding another producer. He knew that Burke was not only honest and competent, but also not too flourishing ; that is to say, was cheap, and would be submissive. Cust therefore advised Orde to let Hoffman have the producer he wanted. It would be just foolishness, Cust thought, to make Mikky angry before it should be necessary. So Burke had been engaged and sat now listening to the voice-trial, tilting his chair, his hands buried in his pockets, and a toothpick, vigorously chewed, in his mouth. Work having begun, Dicky hoped to be an abstainer from drink and tobacco till the last fall of the curtain on the first night. Then he was going to get drunk. Meanwhile he chewed toothpicks. He had bought a box that morning on his way to the voice-trial.

Plock, the chorus-master, was at the piano, ready to accompany anyone who didn't bring a sister. Plock's only interest in the proceedings consisted in counting the number of times he accompanied *Killarney*. He and Hutton had a little bet on the subject. It's a weary world, and the wise man just does the best he can with it.

In the hall till one o'clock the choristers sang or whispered, Plock thumped the piano, Orde sat trying to look like an author, Cust glared and smote the table, Hutton

called out names and made notes, Burke chewed his tooth-pick, and Michael listened with a frown that grew deeper and deeper into his forehead. He was not at all pleased. He was thinking of his poor choruses confided to these women. They were all right for most music that is sung on the London stage, but he doubted them very seriously for "The Conspiracy at Capri." Cust was going to find himself up against trouble.

At one o'clock Cust dismissed the competitors for an hour. He had got through the girls and men that he had provisionally engaged : that is to say, he believed that he had thirty of his chorus. The back of the job was broken. This was a good moment for a little repose.

At once the hall was empty save for the little group by the table. Of these Plock, after pointing out to Hutton that he, Plock, was within five of the number he had backed *Killarney* to reach, hurried away to see if he couldn't make the acquaintance of a girl who had taken his eye.

Hutton, doubting if his position entitled him to remain, slipped quickly out and hurried towards Oxford Street, beer and a chop.

Orde offered lunch at Belini's to the others. Cust and Burke accepted at once, but Michael said :

"Just one moment. I want to ask Cust if he thinks these girls can sing my music."

"Sing it, old boy ?" cried Cust. "Why, on their blessed heads. They're the best lot in London."

"I dare say you don't know any better," said Michael.

"Well, don't be nasty about it, old man," said Cust. "Perhaps your music is a bit high-class for London choristers. But don't you worry. These girls can do it all right. Why, they weren't *singing* this morning."

"What the devil were they doing, then ?" Michael snapped. "I thought it sounded like singing, too," he added.

"Why, my dear old man, I know every one of these girls. I've found scores of shops for them. They know that I know what they can do. They know it's not necessary to burst themselves to-day. But you wait till you hear 'em *rehearsing*."

"That'll be a bit late Cust. I dare say you know that they know that you know that they know all kinds of things. But that's not the point. *I* want to know what they can do. At present I don't think much of this lot you've got us. They may do better at rehearsal, but then again they mayn't. What do *you* say, Orde ? "

Orde understood from Cust that Cust was getting the very best voices that he could for his money. Cust (putting in a stitch in time) had warned his employer that Hoffman would never be content, not though they should engage fifty voices from Covent Garden, or for that matter fifty angels from heaven. Orde did not want to spend too much money on his chorus. He did not believe that chorus music is particularly paying. He thought Hoffman's music was extravagant and would have to be reduced in cost. He held these opinions because Cust had spared no pains to put them into him. Orde, moreover, knew that there was going to be trouble with Hoffman over more than one matter. Cust and he had decided that "*The Conspiracy at Capri*" must be considerably altered. Cust had no confidence in comic opera, and had talked to Orde like a father on the subject. He had, for instance, asked Orde how much real practical knowledge of the stage Hoffman possessed, and if he thought that a musico who had hitherto been concerned in nothing but a few ghastly failures was likely to know what he was talking about so well as an agent who had been in the business all his life, and had assisted at the birth of more howling successes than Hoffman had ever heard of.

Cust and Michael were poles apart over "*The Conspiracy at Capri*."

On all scores this was the moment for Orde to range himself definitely—and not with Hoffman. Their contract was signed, that was a comfort. Hoffman couldn't back out now even if he wanted to. And he, Orde, had all the say-so. Hoffman had got to do as he was told.

And there was another little matter. When that came up for settlement it would help things a good deal if Hoffman had by that time properly realised his position.

Yes, if only for the sake of that little matter, Hoffman must be shown where he was as soon as possible.

Orde said : " Why, I think Cust's got us a very good chorus."

" The Lord mend your taste," said Michael roughly, for he was much in earnest. " They're just musical comedy girls, that's all. They've never *smelt* music like that I've written for them. They can do it somehow, no doubt, but they'll screech, old man ; they'll screech like owls in a week, and we're out for a longer run than that."

" Oh, come," said Orde. " You want too much. Cust tells me these are the very best people he knows that are free. It's not only a matter of expense. We must have pretty girls. And these are a good-looking lot. We don't want a chorus of fat cows of prima-donnas, Hoffman. You can't have everything."

" Well," said Michael, " of course I can't. But I do want voices. Cut the frocks down a bit and give me good voices, can't you, old man ? "

" Laddie," said Cust at this moment, " don't you ask for the frocks to go short. You've *got* to dress a musical comedy well."

" Damn it, Cust ! " cried Michael, " how many times am I to tell you this isn't a musical comedy ? "

" Well," said Cust, " the sooner it is one the better. I've always been against the comic opera idea for it. They don't want comic opera."

" They're going to get it, though," said Michael stubbornly.

" You must please yourself, of course," said Cust, " but you won't get a better lot at the price, not though you wrote another *Ring* for them. My good chap, you can't pick up opera voices just anywhere and any time. And even if you could, they'd be no use to *us*. They can only move their legs in one way and their arms in another. And as for chorus business, why, they don't know what it means. Now, *my* girls can dance your old tarantellas at sight, and you've only got to give them the business to a song once and it's *in* them. Why, Burke can drill that lot perfect in every one of your numbers in a week."

" Yes," said Burke, " *that* lot. I know 'em all. It's the others, those we're *going* to hear, that make me shiver,

bless them. But there's no doubt, Hoffman, Cust's selection will be a power when it comes to chorus business. With twenty well-trained girls in a chorus you can do pretty nearly anything straight off. But if you've only a crowd of full-throated Tetrazzinis to manœuvre, you're done. They wouldn't understand. They'd sing like blazes, no doubt ; but there's more in chorus work than just fa-la-la and par-bars."

"Ah," said Cust, "now if this was 'The Messiah' we were producing, old man, I wouldn't blame you. The kind of women you seem to want look all right from the back of the Albert Hall in white muslin and blue sashes. But you must remember that *we've* got The Bath Theatre, and that the stage'll be lit pretty brightly. The boys in the stalls must have something to look at."

"Yes," said Burke, "that's just bed-rock business, Mikky."

Michael, full of fight, opened his mouth to speak, but the words never came out. He remained staring at the door through which Psyche Whittaker had just made her appearance.

Orde acted with remarkable promptness, considering that he was quite unprepared for this particular crisis. "Ah," he said, getting up, "here's a young lady that I want to make known to you, Hoffman." He went to meet Psyche, leaving Michael to think what he pleased. She waited for Orde at the door.

"Why, Miss Van Loo," he said warmly, taking both her hands, "here's a pleasant surprise."

"I thought," she said, "I'd just come and see how you were all getting on. But, of course, if I'm in the way——"

"Silly girl," he said. "As if you could ! But it's no end of a bore, a voice-trial. You won't enjoy it."

"Oh yes, I shall," said Psyche. "You haven't finished, then ?"

"Heavens, no ! We're all going out to lunch. You haven't lunched, have you ?" he inquired anxiously.

"Not much. That's what I came for," she said. "Where shall we go ? Are the others coming ? Can't we go somewhere by ourselves ? I've got a heap of things to ask you ? Who's the big fatty ?"

"That's Burke. He's producing the show. Won't you come over and let me introduce him?" They crossed the room together, and Orde said, "You know Mr. Cust, I think." Cust took off his hat and smiled amiably, while his eye drifted towards Michael. He expected no end of a scene with Mikky in his present peppery condition.

"Mr. Burke, Miss Van Loo," Orde continued. Burke bowed, and wondered where the deuce they'd got hold of this black-eyed charmer. This was no Albert Hall chorister, at any rate. His producer's soul sang aloud within him. Whatever part this novelty was meant for it would have to be incubated a bit.

"Mr. Hoffman," Orde said, concluding the introductions. It had been agreed that neither Orde nor Cust was to know that Psyche and Michael had ever met in their lives. But Orde could not altogether control his colour, which, he felt, was growing deeper than he could have wished.

"Charmed to meet Mr. Hoffman," said Psyche, holding out her hand. "Mr. Orde has told me of your wonderful music," she went on graciously. "I'm dying to hear it."

Michael took no interest in her desire to hear his music. He only wanted to know one thing in the world—whether this was or was not a put-up job. Until he was clear about this his tongue was confined to the civilities of ordinary life. How the girl had got hold of Orde he didn't ask himself. She'd done it, and that was enough for the present. Whether she had persuaded him to attempt to put her into the play was a question which could wait also. But did Orde know that she had tried on the same game before? Was Orde as innocent as he was doing his best to look?—and by the same token he was infernally red. And what about Cust? In a word, where did he, Michael, stand? Was this just bad luck or treachery? Was it just bounce on the girl's part, or were Orde and Cust in it? A good many thoughts had passed through Michael's brain while Orde was bringing Psyche across the Assembly Hall.

In his turn he bowed, saying nothing. This was not the

moment for explanations. It would be stupid to get up a row and then be told that Psyche was here only as a spectator. If a row there had to be, it was better that the girl should be out of it. He had said some pretty rough things to this Psyche, but then, if he had put her to shame, it was in front of nobody else : he shrank from explaining why the girl was no use to him, with three men looking on at her humiliation. Many times since she had called on him he had been sorry that he had let her madden him with her silly tale about Linda being a liar. He swore that he would say nothing till he had Orde and Cust to himself. But then some questions were going to be asked. *And* answered.

So he bowed, smouldering, and took Psyche's hand in silence, and met her eye with a hostile stare, and wondered why women had been invented.

Psyche turned to the others with a bright laugh. "And now," she said, "what about lunch ? I'm starving."

" You'll come, Hoffman ? " said Orde.

" No," said Michael. " Not this morning, Orde. I've got some thinking to do."

" All right, old boy," said Orde carelessly.

It seemed that the row was postponed. Well, that was just as Hoffman pleased. Any time would do for Orde.

He took Psyche's arm familiarly and led her to the door. Cust and Burke followed. Nothing that had happened had destroyed the appetites of these men. The two couples passed through the swing-door, and Michael was left alone in the big, stuffy, sordid room.

In the passage Psyche stopped suddenly. " Oh," she cried, " my shoe-lace is undone ! Go on, I'll be with you in a moment. It's too dark to see here." She ran back, pushed open the swing-door of the Assembly Hall, and went in.

Michael looked up from the paper on which he was scribbling with a pencil, and saw the girl elaborately fastening her shoe. He perceived that she was here to enjoy her triumph. He watched her with a certain interest. What would she do or say ? She had her back to him and was bent over her shoe. Presently she would turn and wave her hand to him or put out her tongue at him, or

call out some stupid thing or other, and go, having made what she would think a good exit.

When Psyche had finished tying her shoe she went straight out of the door without once turning her head. It was as if she supposed herself alone in the hall.

“Damme ! ” said Michael, grinning in spite of himself. “That was pretty good—for her.”

CHAPTER XXIV

I

MICHAEL ate no lunch that day. He spent his interval at the table, digging the point of his pencil into the soft deal until he broke it. Then he threw the thing away, picked up a pen and dug anew. He found the pen more suitable for his purpose. It went deeper; he could dig it more viciously.

He was readjusting his impressions of Orde.

For many weeks now the engagement of their manager had been the only incident which had so much as suggested to Michael that his collaborator was capable of acting on his own responsibility, and, even there, it had been obvious that Orde had meant to do no more than ask Cust's advice about an autumn production. Had he not been indiscreet concerning their plot, Orde could easily have been turned away from Cust. All this week, since that singular and unfortunate display of his initiative, Orde had been just the same very good boy as before, giving no cause for anxiety whatever. Though Cust had hinted several times that "The Conspiracy at Capri" would stand a better chance as a musical comedy than as a comic opera, Orde had never backed him up. On the contrary, he had used all the arguments which Michael had used to him to combat Cust's proposals for the degradation of the play. Michael had even congratulated himself on having drummed the idea so thoroughly into a thick head. He had been glad that he had taken so much trouble with Orde at the beginning. Orde, as a convert to comic opera, had been very useful.

And now here was Cust offering them a rank musical comedy chorus, and Orde expressing himself as thoroughly pleased with the agent's choice. And as if this wasn't enough, Psyche Whittaker arrived from the sky and Orde took her out to lunch. By what means the girl had captured Orde Michael didn't trouble to ask himself. He was too much occupied with the problem which her appearance had created. That she was intended for the play was clear. Orde's embarrassment, her own insolent triumph, left the matter beyond doubt. She had got round Orde, and Orde proposed to put her in. *Orde* did. *Orde*! The convenient, the subservient Orde. Orde, who always did what he was told.

And Cust knew about it. That was a certainty. He had looked guilty enough for a murder. But Burke didn't know. He was a white man. He wouldn't take a hand in a dirty little conspiracy of the kind. And had he known he would have dropped a hint. Burke was all right. Even though he could have done nothing, he wouldn't have let them spring the girl on a man without a word to prepare him. It was sure that Burke had never seen Psyche before that morning.

But Orde would find himself mistaken if he thought he was going to load up the stage with his little friends. And Cust too. There would have to be a very considerable and comprehensive explanation when this infernal voice-trial was over. Miss Whittaker would have to be sent trotting p. d. q. Michael wished that he had brought his copy of the agreement with Orde to the Paganini Rooms. He would have liked to read it and see just where he stood. He had skimmed it through, of course, on the morning when he and Orde signed it at Cust's office—but only to see that the royalty part expressed what they had agreed, and the part about Orde incurring the whole financial responsibility. Michael was quite ignorant of its other contents. He felt that he would be happier if he could go through it now. He would prefer to be quite sure of his ground while he talked to Cust and Orde. But he expected the agreement was all right. It had been drawn up by a solicitor.

What dismayed him was the discovery that Orde was

not, perhaps, the obedient capitalist-amanuensis which he had imagined him to be. He felt like an aeroplanist whose engine stops working a thousand feet up. Till this moment he had carried on with an ever-increasing certainty of his ability to control the destinies of "The Conspiracy at Capri," mounting higher and higher in his own estimation, thinking less and less of his support. Orde was a necessity, but a mere machine accompanying the flight towards fame. And now the machine was exhibiting a tendency to take command of the enterprise, to do things disastrously on its own account.

Michael, digging his pen into the table, stared at a situation that was full of dreadful possibilities.

II

Psyche returned with the three men. I am sure that she would have liked to hear the rest of the voice-trial from the table, but no one offered her a chair. Cust was prepared to be civil to her, but not to that extent. His dignity as manager was more precious to him than Psyche's good-will. He had earned his money (he had it in his pocket), and Cust never gave luckpenny. To Burke it did not occur to suppose that any actress, unless she were actually finding the money, would so much as dream of sitting with the management. Michael—well, Michael didn't offer a chair to Psyche.

Orde, studying Cust's dignity, found her a place in a corner, on the raised line of seats, and there he left her. He would rather have sat by her and chatted, but he wanted to impress her with his own importance, too. So he took his place at the table and listened to the singing with a heavy frown across his forehead, made notes on a piece

of paper, tugged at his moustache, and while each competitor retired from the piano held a small portentous conversation with Cust. Occasionally he relaxed his judicial air and smiled across the room at Psyche, and sometimes he shrugged too as if to say, "Shall we never be done with this tedious but necessary business?" At Michael he did not look at all, but he was aware of trouble that brewed across the table.

Michael barely listened to the singing. He knew the quality that Cust was offering. The voices of the afternoon would not be so good as the voices of the morning. But it didn't matter. Either he would have a chorus that could sing his music or he wouldn't. That was for future decision. If Cust had his way it was (so he felt) all up with the chorus-music of "The Conspiracy." If not, Cust would have to rustle round to organise a new voice-trial. Until the time should come for the inevitable row Michael abandoned himself to forebodings.

III

The singing dragged to its end about five o'clock, and left them all with their nerves raw—all but Psyche, who was gone. At first she had enjoyed every minute. She was new enough to the Theatre to be interested in the dreary business and heartless enough to be amused by many of the singers. Between the second and third song she slipped obtrusively out of the hall and was gone five minutes. After she had come back she made sketches of the artists, openly, in a book she had bought. The artists were very much annoyed, but as everybody knew that she was a particular friend of Mr. Orde, criticism of her performance was confined to the entrance and the passage. Psyche

obtained some capital pictures. There was, for instance, a little man with legs much too short for his body, a tiny head and a tiny mouth, who sang his verse with tremendous expression, rolling his eyes and swaying on his feet in grotesque operatic fashion. He had a fluty little voice and was altogether very comical. As a chorister he was impossible, and even Cust couldn't understand how he came to be there ; but people of the kind *will* get to know when auditions are to be held. It was simpler to let him sing and go away than to forbid him and have a scene. So they let him sing and go away. It was a month before the poor little devil and his wife gave up hoping for the letter which Hutton had promised. But he served one purpose by attending Cust's voice-trial. He procured Psyche several most amusing minutes and enriched her sketch-book by one spirited caricature.

She stayed till nearly four ; then suddenly got bored and went away. She had made her effect on Hoffman, and had no particular reason to stay after the voice-trial had lost its novelty. And she craved tea. And she was annoyed with Orde for leaving her to herself. She never so much as looked at him as she went out. This made Orde sulky, and he let her go. He wasn't going to run after her before all these people, confound her !

At last the thing got itself done. Cust had a chorus to his own satisfaction and to Orde's ; Michael had three possible voices ; Burke's approval of the singers that had been chosen depended entirely upon what was going to be done about the music. If Mikky would come down a peg or two the chorus would be all right. If not, the play would be a frost. Burke was perfectly aware that Michael had no money in the show. It appeared to him, therefore, to be a foregone conclusion that Mikky would have to come down. He was sorry for Mikky. The boy had written some fine chorus stuff. But Mikky's music with Cust's present chorus was all in Burke's eye. It wasn't a workable proposition, and the sooner Mikky understood as much the better. Burke, as producer, had no wish to be responsible for a frost. It wouldn't do *him* a little bit of good.

IV

The last competitor—a light baritone who called himself a tenor—advanced to the piano, song in hand ; for the last time Plock played an introduction ; for the last time the first verse of some ditty or other was indifferently rendered ; for the last time Hutton repeated his formula about writing in a day or two ; the last competitor passed through the swing door blessing his stars that he was free and cursing his luck that he had been kept to the end.

"Well," said Cust, removing his hat and putting it on the table, "*that's done.*"

"Yes," said Orde, and added, "Thank Heaven ! "

Burke said nothing, but looked at Michael. The chorus-master and the stage-manager were not expected to say anything. They were putting their papers together before going.

"And now," said Cust, "let us refresh at the place opposite." There was a general movement.

"Orde," said Michael, leaning forward, "I've got to have a talk with you."

"Go ahead, old boy," said Orde as carelessly as he could. He seated himself on the edge of the table.

"Alone," said Michael.

"As you will, old man," said Orde, with a laugh. "Boys," he went on, "await me in The Place Opposite. Ask for what you want, and tell the bar lady I'm coming to pay."

The others trooped out, Plock telling Hutton that this was a bit of all right, this was, and Hutton replying that he only hoped it would keep up to sample.

"And now, old boy ?" Orde asked when they were alone.

"This chorus won't do, Orde."

"I'm sorry you're not pleased, Hoffman," said Orde. "Personally, I'm quite satisfied, you know."

"Yes," said Michael, "I know." He paused to give effect to the words which he was going to say. These were, "But I'm not."

Orde perceived an opportunity and took it, deftly, I must admit.

"In that case," he said, "we differ. What more is to be said?"

Michael's eye was savage as he replied, "D'you mean that, Orde?"

"Well, what else should I mean? It's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"It's damnably obvious," said Michael angrily.

Orde laughed. "My dear old boy," he said, "tuck in your shirt, for Heaven's sake, and don't let's quarrel. I suppose even you will admit that the man who's putting up the money has some right to say how it's to be spent. Now, just listen to reason a moment. You want a chorus of grand opera voices. Well, so do I, if it comes to that. Your music's worthy of only the best rendering. I grant that. So does Cust. So does Burke. So would anyone who'd heard it. But a grand opera chorus is out of the question for a light opera, like this. We must have girls who can dance and do chorus-business and be pretty, besides being able to sing. It's not practical, what you want, Hoffman."

Michael put a strong restraint upon himself. This was life and death to his music, and he must keep a steady head while he fought for the poor thing.

"All I say," he said, "is this: Cust could have found us better voices if he'd tried. There are scores better to be had. These are just pantomime choristers. I *don't* want a grand opera chorus. My music isn't grand opera music, but it *is* light opera music, and Cust's got us nothing but touring musical comedy girls to sing it. He knew the play was a light opera, and he's dished up a crowd of women that he knows can't sing it. He's no confidence in comic opera, I know that; but you and I have. It looks to me as if Cust was trying to force our hand. I know we must have pretty women and that they must be able to dance a bit and do some chorus-business. But I *don't* want elaborate dancing and business from my chorus. Their only

legitimate business is to sing my music. Now these girls can't."

"Oh yes," said Orde soothingly, "if you'll drop it a bit in a few places. That big second act finale, for instance. That'll be a bit tough for them, I admit. But you can fit it for them in an afternoon."

"I dare say," said Michael smoothly, "but I want to know why I must ruin that finale because Cust's—well, shall we say incompetent? I could use a harder word, you know."

"My dear Hoffman," said Orde, "you yourself urged me to engage Cust." Michael let this pass. "I don't think," Orde went on, "that you're treating me very fairly. After all I've done, and am going to do for you, I did think you'd be a bit more reasonable. I hate to be always reminding you that it's my money we're playing with. I'm all for high art as much as you please, but I really don't feel inclined to break myself for its sake. I suppose you'd rather have the chorus you want and a one-night run than these girls of Cust's and a two-year success with provincial and foreign royalties for the rest of your life. If so, *I* wouldn't."

"Then," said Michael, "I'm to understand that you're *with* Cust in this?"

"Yes," said Orde.

"Very good. Now we know where we are, and I've to consider what I shall do. But first I want to ask you one other thing. That Miss Whittaker. What about her?"

"Whittaker?" Orde asked in quite sincere surprise. "Who's she?"

"Oh, I forgot. She has some fancy name or other. I mean the girl you took out to lunch. What about her?"

"Well," said Orde, "what about her? She's a discovery of mine."

"Yes, I know. But is she coming into the show?"

"Yes," said Orde, steadily enough. "She has a lot of talent, and a face like hers would be a big help. Cust says—"

"By the way," Michael interrupted, "isn't she a discovery of Cust's in the first place?"

"Well, he introduced her to me."

"Ah!" Michael thought awhile.

Orde lit a cigarette. He was nervous and didn't want to show it.

"Do you know who she is?" Michael asked at last.

"Only," said Orde, stroking his moustache, "that she is a very charming young person." He gave out a fatuous little laugh, which maddened Michael.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Michael. "She's a mere amateur. I know her. She's a rich girl who's stage-struck. That's a warning, Orde. You may have your hands full if you're not careful. She's not just a typist who's lost her job."

"You mean——" asked Orde.

"I just mean what I say."

"Thank you," said Orde coldly. "In that case I will only say that your suggestion is offensive to Miss Van Loo, and I ask you not to repeat it. Personally, I ignore it."

"Well," said Michael, "that's all right and just as you please. Now, here's another thing. A little time ago she asked me to job her into 'The Conspiracy,' and I refused. Naturally she didn't tell you that. Has Cust let you hear her sing?"

Not only had Orde heard Psyche sing, but he knew also about her rejection by Michael, though not perhaps all.

"Yes," he said. "She has a very nice voice. Not strong, of course, but——"

"Not strong!" cried Michael. "Oh, God, not strong! A telephone makes more noise, Orde. Why, if she stood up on The Bath's stage and sang, the stalls would wonder why she was opening and shutting her mouth like that. It might make them laugh—once."

"We only thought of her for the chorus, of course," said Orde.

It is strange that Orde, though he knew he was playing Michael a shabby trick and didn't care, still shrank from incurring the contempt of the musician for his judgment.

"Oh, the chorus!" said Michael savagely. "Hell!"

"It's only one voice," Orde continued. "We can afford one place to a girl that's as handsome as Miss Van Loo. Why, Cust says we can boom the piece with her photos alone. We'll have them in every illustrated paper. We

can give her a small thinking part just to have her name on the bills, you know. She needn't really sing a note or speak a word. And she's lots of talent, she has really. We ought to encourage——”

“ Talent ! ” Michael burst out. “ Talent ! Lord love you, man. That's only part of it. Don't I tell you I refused her a place ? How d'you think I show up if she comes in in my teeth ? And do you know another reason why I refused ? Because I thought that if I put her in I'd just be asking Cust and Hutton and that young Plock, and every other damned fellow, to roll up with little friends of their own. I wanted to keep all that kind of thing out of our show. It's rotten for a play. And now, first thing I know, *you* come up with a little friend ; and who is she ? The very girl I refused. She can move round the stage and make goo-goo eyes at the boxes right enough, of course, and it won't kill the play to have a pretty passenger ; but damme ! I won't have her, and there's an end of it. *She* mayn't mind coming in after I've told her I won't have her, but *you* can't go on with it now I've told *you*.”

Orde's face grew obstinate.

“ If I may say so, old man,” he said, “ I think you took a good deal upon yourself in telling Miss Van Loo that you wouldn't have her, and I think you take a good deal more upon yourself in telling *me* you won't have her. I would remind you once more that it's my money——”

“ Oh, damn your money ! ” cried Michael. “ You're going to put her in, then ? ”

“ Certainly. Is that definite ? ”

“ Quite,” said Michael. “ The only trouble you'll have is to find a play to put her in.”

“ What d'you mean ? ”

“ Why, that I withdraw my music. I chuck the whole show. I go out. This play's being run on lines I don't like. I don't mean to have it ruined. I prefer to have it not produced. It's either that girl or me. You can choose, Orde.”

Orde smiled. “ Not a bit,” he said amiably. “ I'll have both, old boy. You'd better read your contract, Hoffman.”

“ My contract ? ”

"Yes," said Orde. "D'you think I'd have taken a theatre and made myself responsible for scenery and dresses and left you free to clear out with all the music if every little thing didn't please you? I said you weren't practical, old man. Of course I can't make you do any more work if you don't choose to. We'll have to get in someone else to lower the tone of those choruses for us, and any little things that may have to be done in rehearsal. I expect Plock can do that all right. But we've *got* your music, you see, and I'm afraid you can't do anything to stop us using it. It's all in the contract." He lit another cigarette, but he kept a wary eye on Michael. He was not at all sure what was going to happen.

Michael said and did nothing. He was examining his situation.

Orde had almost certainly stated the case as it existed. When the contract should be examined, it was clear Orde would be found to be master. The uneasy sensations which had been growing stronger within Michael all day had culminated in certainty. This was not bluff. Orde could not talk like this unless he was absolutely sure of his ground. Legal advice on the contract could only support him. The music was his to use, not Michael's to withdraw. Of course it was. Nothing else was possible. The crafty devil! His past submissiveness had been all part of the game.

And now what was to be done?

One thing only—to stick it out; to swallow Psyche and Cust's chorus and anything else they chose to give him, if only he might stay by his music and preserve it from their hands as far as he could. If they got Plock to work on it! It would have to be dropped, of course, but Plock mustn't drop it.

For a few seconds he considered deliberately whether he should kick Orde all round the hall and then out into the street, and so in among his waiting friends in "The Place Opposite," or simply knock him about a little and spoil his handsome face for him.

This phase passed—to his satisfaction. He was glad to have hold of himself again. He was prepared now to make the best of a bad job.

They had played it low on him, and there was no remedy. He must abandon his ideal "Conspiracy at Capri" and make up his mind to something less admirable, but not less admirable than could be helped. If he left now they would turn it into an ordinary go-as-you-please musical comedy in a week. He could save it from that, at any rate—so long as the job of altering the music was his.

And even an unideal "Conspiracy at Capri" might succeed. At least, Orde would spend more freely if he had it all his own way. If a man retired now, the Lord knew what the effect would be. The contract might, for all he knew, provide for the forfeiture of all royalties in such an event.

Michael meant to get all there was to be got out of his play, whether of fame or money.

For Linda's sake he had got to fall into line with the Vandals. Well, he wasn't the first artist who'd done the same. And, after all, what was art? A livelihood like sausage selling—for those, at least, who had to live by it.

"Well, Orde," he said at last, "I congratulate you." He rose. "I expect you've got me whipped," he said, "but I don't squeal. I think I'll go and get right to work on that second act finale. It'll keep me busy, at any rate."

Orde was enchanted. He had never dreamed that he would meet with so little trouble.

"Well," he said, "we had to have this talk, old boy, and I'm glad it's done. It wasn't possible to go on until my position was made clear. But I think you see it now and understand that nothing else is practical politics. If I've said anything you didn't like, I apologise, and I'm sure I shan't remember anything you said which I mayn't have thought in the best of taste. Shan't we shake hands, old boy?"

"I don't think it's necessary, old boy," said Michael as he lit a cigarette and put on his hat. With that he walked out of the hall.

Orde was far too wise to be annoyed by Michael's conduct. He waited a few moments while he scraped a fingernail with his penknife. Then he repaired to "The Place Opposite" to inform Cust that all was well.

V

Michael turned south into Oxford Street, made his way to one of the cheap restaurants that abound near the Circus, secured a table for two, ordered the first thing that came into his head, and, taking out his note-book, began his task of "dropping" the finale to the second act. His bun, or whatever it was, lay neglected by his elbow. Though he had not eaten since breakfast he didn't want that bun. It was simply his fee for half an hour's use of the table.

The din that went up all around him, the clattering of crockery, the calls of the waitresses, the noisy conversations of the customers troubled him not at all. He would have worked no more easily in a desert, nor, one may add, would his work have been of any better quality had his hateful task been the most delightful in the world. This was music he was doing, and he was incapable of scamping it. Twenty seconds after sitting down he was utterly absorbed.

At half-past six Linda's hand on his shoulder brought him back to a realisation of his surroundings. He took it and kissed it, while he slipped his note-book into his pocket. Then he saw that something was wrong.

"What's the matter?" he said, pulling her down to the other chair.

"Psyche!" she said. "She's told me that——"

He laughed. "Much obliged to her," he said, "then I needn't."

"No," said Linda; and "The little pig!" she exclaimed hotly. "Oh, Michael," she cried, "it's my fault! I introduced her to you."

"Footle!" he said, "if it comes to that it's *my* fault. Didn't I drag you to her house by the hair of your head? Oh! we'd better blame old Whittaker for advertising, if we've got to blame anybody. But what's the use? It's

just bad luck, and we must make the best of it. She's only going to have a thinking part. They want her *face*, that's all. *She* can't hurt the play. And, personally, you know, I rather admire her. She must have some sand to force her way in after what I said to her."

"She's unspeakable!" said Linda.

"Oh no," he said, "Psyche's all right. She'll look very pretty on the stage, you know."

"She told me," said Linda, "as I was leaving the house. She waylaid me with her absurd contract in her hand. It seems she went and saw Cust, sang and danced for him, and got her engagement at once."

"Oh, I dare say," said Michael. "Cust pretends to think her no end of a discovery, you know. I dare say she bought him. It doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter a bit, Linda. She can't hurt the play."

He wished Linda to believe this, though he couldn't believe it himself.

"What maddens me," said Linda, "is her triumph over you. She absolutely exulted. She was horrible."

"I don't mind confessing," he said, "that it maddened *me* a good deal. But I've got over that. I'm going to try to hope that she'll enjoy herself. Orde's going to do his best to give her a good time, at any rate."

"Orde?" said Linda.

"Well, naturally," he said. "You don't suppose Cust could have jobbed her in against my wishes if he hadn't had Orde behind him?"

"You mean that Orde——"

"Why, Linda," he said, "I mean that Orde's no less impressionable than any other fool of the kind. And now let's get something to eat." He called a waitress and gave his order for two steaks and potatoes. Meanwhile Linda thought.

"Michael," she said, "I don't like this."

He laughed. "I don't care about it very much myself," he said.

"I mean Psyche. I'm afraid for her. What sort of a man is this Orde?"

"Oh, he's like anybody else."

"I mean, is he a decent kind of man? Is he likely to do that poor child any harm?"

"I doubt," he said, "if anybody could do that. I expect he'd like to try, though. But I gave him the tip that she's well off and by way of being a lady ; and he's a cautious card. I fancy he'll think twice about it, anyway. But it's her look-out, not mine. I didn't invite her into the show."

"You don't mean that," said Linda.

"Well, I don't. But what can I do ? Orde's made up his mind that she's to come in, and I can't keep her out. And she's made up her mind to use Orde, and I can't persuade her not to. What do you suggest ? She must just stand her chance. From what I know of her I don't think she's in much danger. She seems pretty wide awake. I don't think Orde's moustache'll lead her a step farther than she chooses to go."

"It's not a thing that ought to be so much as risked," said Linda. "I shall tell her father. She mustn't be allowed to do this."

"If her father can stop her I shall be very much obliged to him," said Michael. "But I won't pretend it's because I'm anxious lest the girl should make a fool of herself that I think you should tell him. I want her out of the show— whoever takes her out, and for whatever reason. It may be bad for her to be friends with Orde, but I'm very certain it's not very good for my play for her to be in it. She sets a bad precedent. They'll all be wanting to job in their friends now. And I'm very much more interested in my play than in Psyche."

Linda hadn't listened to him.

"Yes," she said meditatively, "I shall tell him."

"Do, Linda, do," said Michael.

"I'll make him," she said, "understand that he's got *some* responsibility towards that poor little thing." But Linda said nothing about the consequences which she feared her action would bring. Since she intended to do this thing it was no good worrying Michael.

"Well," he said, "let it go at that. And now, don't let's talk about her any more. I'm tired of her. There's something much more unpleasant to worry us to-night."

"What's that ?" cried Linda, in her alarm forgetting all about Psyche.

"Why, that I've got to work all this evening, and all to-morrow, and I can't take you to hear the Fifth Symphony, and I can't take you on the river to-morrow. It's the chorus stuff. It's too difficult for the people we've got. I have to alter it."

"Oh!" said Linda, prodigiously disappointed.

"Never mind," he said, "it's the way of the world."

"I think," said Linda, "that I hate the way of the world."

"Oh no," he said, "it's all right. It's not such a bad old way, Linda. It brings Psyche in a bit too much, and it prevents Cust from being a particularly good agent, and it might perhaps make a better job of Orde; but it gives me you, Linda. It wouldn't be fair for me to have everything that matters and everything that doesn't matter as well. I've got to leave you to-night and let you have a lonely Sunday to-morrow. But being together isn't the really important thing; it's the owning one another that counts. We've got that, and neither that silly little Psyche nor Orde nor Cust nor Cust's rotten choristers can rob us of it. Psyche——" he broke off, and—"Ah ha!" he cried, his eyes lighting up, "here comes the grub, God bless it!"

CHAPTER XXV

I

BURKE had asked a month for his production, but they were able to give him more than that. The opening was fixed provisionally for the last day in September at The Bath Theatre. Burke was fairly happy about his share in the enterprise. He had a number of competent artists, a competent chorus (now that Mikky had come in to heel), a very decent book, a lot of excellent music, a satisfactory capital, and five weeks and three days in which to combine all these elements into a musical play. Had it not been for one thing Burke would have felt that he was on velvet.

Since he had discovered that Miss Van Loo was an amateur, a friend of Orde's intended for a thinking part, and not an artist, hitherto unknown to him, whom Cust had discovered for one of his principals, he pursed up his lips whenever his dull-looking eyes rested upon Psyche. But he said nothing of his doubts to anybody. Burke never went to meet trouble.

At ten o'clock, then, on the morning of Monday, the 23rd of August, there were gathered in the Assembly Hall, the Paganini Rooms the following persons :

Of the Management : Cust, Orde, Burke, Hutton.

Plock and Michael were in another room with the chorus, teaching them their music.

Artists (I set their characters opposite to them) :

ROBERT NISBET,

The Prince of Capri

JOSEPH CHATTERTON
(First comedian)

Giovanni, Chief of Police

BELLAMY FRODSHAM,

Adolpho, son of the Prince, in love
with Claudina

ENGLISH LANG.,

CHARLES TRUEFITT
(Second comedian)ANTHONY LUSHINGTON,
WALTER HEARN,
CHARLES BURCHAM,
FREDERICK FRERE,
GRACIE CORDING,JANE WHEELAN,
QUEENIE RODWELL,

PSYCHE VAN Loo

Lorenzo, son of Giovanni by a first
marriage, in love with RosellaGisco, son of Giovanni and Gilda, and
leader of the Boy-BrigandsTommaso, } *Policemen*

Fernando, }

Bernardo, } *Citizens of Capri*

Leonardo, }

Claudina, supposed daughter of
Giovanni and rightful heiress to
throne of Capri

Gilda, wife of Giovanni

Rosella, daughter of Gilda by a first
marriage

(?)

The name of the thinking character which Psyche was to play had not yet been chosen, that is to say Orde had not yet succeeded in pleasing her with anything which he had suggested. In his pocket, however, he had a new little list of female Italian names, from which he trusted Miss Van Loo would be able to choose one under which she would care to figure on the bill.

It may occur to you to wonder why Mr. Tertius Ray was not of the company. The answer is simple. There was only one person in the world who was vitally interested in Mr. Ray's welfare, and that person was, at this period, in the provinces with "The Girl who Got On," Number Two company. His name was Tertius Ray.

All round the room the artists stood or sat in small groups, each clutching his or her part and telling somebody else what a rotten one it was. Burke stepped out into the middle of the floor and ran his eye slowly over the chattering artists. The chattering ceased, save in one corner, but Burke made no observation. He bided his time.

He disposed four couples of chairs according to his desires. Then "These," he announced, "are the entrances. This one is a church door with steps. This one leads on from behind the church. This one is an archway in a line of houses, and this one is the door of Giovanni's restaurant. First policeman discovered asleep." And he placed a chair where the church steps were supposed to be. "Tommaso!" he called.

Mr. Anthony Lushington disengaged himself with alacrity

from his group and came forward, placed himself on the chair, and assumed as reposeful an attitude as its very uncomfortable character permitted. He made little snoring sounds, and Burke gave him an approving glance. Burke had never worked with this boy before, but that was how he liked them.

"Dawn music," he continued, reading from his script. "Curtain rises. Two boy-brigands; one scrawling 'Death to Giovanni' on the door of the restaurant, the other pinning a revolutionary manifesto on Tommaso's back. Exit the boys. More music. Enter second policeman from behind the church. Fernando!"

Nothing happened.

"Mr. Hearn," cried Burke in an appalling voice.

Mr. Walter Hearn sprang from the side of Miss Queenie Rodwell and came running to Burke.

"You've entered through a house wall, Mr. Hearn," said Burke. "That's not in your part. This isn't a harlequinade, Mr. Hearn."

Mr. Hearn hung his head.

"Please enter from behind the church, Mr. Hearn, right centre. You'll find that in your part when you can take a leisure moment to glance at it."

"Certainly, certainly," said Mr. Hearn; "but where is the church?"

"Just where it was three minutes ago, Mr. Hearn," said the producer amiably, "when I had the pleasure of pointing it out to you."

Miss Cording, Miss Wheelan, and Miss Rodwell giggled. They did not like Hearn.

"Very sorry," said the miserable young man, "I didn't hear."

"Never mind," said Burke, "it's difficult to do more than one thing at a time, I know. I'm afraid I was guilty of being so discourteous as to fail to observe that you were engaged in conversation. I apologise, Mr. Hearn. Now let me draw your attention—if you are quite free—to the situation of the church. It is here, Mr. Hearn. Is it too much to wish you to bear that fact in mind? I've no doubt you think that I am very fussy, but we producers, you know, get in the habit of liking to have things just so.

So will you condescend to oblige me by entering in the place set down in your part? In short, between these two chairs."

Mr. Hearn, hating Burke most heartily, but cowed for ever, made a short excursion towards the back of the room and returned between the two chairs indicated to him.

"Cross right," said Burke kindly, "singing your first two lines; shake Tommaso by the shoulder. He wakes up and sings to you. Just read your lines, gentlemen, and I'll give you your business later."

Thereupon Mr. Hearn did as he was directed, reading from his part, and, with the assistance of Mr. Lushington, embarked upon the opening scene of "The Conspiracy at Capri," thus :

FERNANDO : Awake, my Tommaso, your vigil is ended;
I trust the night watches have peacefully passed.

TOMMASO : I thank you, Fernando, my rest has been splendid.
I perceive you have come to relieve me at last.

The rehearsal was begun.

11

Psyche, with the typed copy of the play which Orde had given her on her knee, sat near the door apart from the other members of the company, none of whom had made any attempt to be civil to her. The men understood that Mr. Orde was interested in Miss Van Loo, and for this reason contented themselves with admiring her from afar; the three women were too apprehensive for their parts in the presence of this unknown beauty to be cordial to her. They saw in her a menace to their own prominence. Who knew how many of their precious lines would be cut out

in the course of the next month to make room for an encroaching hussy ?

Psyche thought them all very unsociable, but she didn't care. She was not attracted by any of these people—on the whole she preferred her splendid isolation. So long as Mr. Orde was kind and nice she had no reason to seek the society of the actors and actresses.

She looked on at the proceedings with all her eyes. This was life at last—a real rehearsal of a real play ; none of your bungling amateur school-shows. How competent that Burke person seemed ! What a dressing down he had given that young man who had failed to come on in the proper place ! How big and ugly and Bohemian-looking he was, and what an air of authority he had when he spoke to people ! How that poor devil of a Fernando had shrivelled up ! She wondered if the producer would speak to the girls that way if they made mistakes. Would he, for instance, try it on with her ? She hoped not, for his sake. That sort of thing was all very well for common actors and actresses, but he'd better not imagine that she would take it from him. She almost hoped he would be rude to her so that she could put him in his place, and show these actor people (who were so stand-off) that she was of some account in the play. Yet, again, she hoped nothing of the sort would happen. She meant to be very sweet to Burke. Cust had advised this. He had said that Burke was a person that she would do very well to be civil to. She had no wish to quarrel with Burke, unless he should make it necessary. Burke, Cust had said, could do more for her, really, than even Orde, if he thought her worth putting forward in the show.

She wondered when they would arrange for her to make her first entrance. She didn't mean just to come on with the crowd of citizens (after this duet between Tommaso and Fernando), when they discussed the threatened revolution and wondered whether they should or should not go to the Blue Grotto in obedience to the summons in the "Manifesto." No, she wanted a proper entrance, all to herself. Orde had suggested that she should be a market-girl, and bring a basket of fruit to Giovanni's restaurant and have a short scene with old Joe Chatterton ; but she wasn't

sure that this appealed to her. She meant to have a part that was a real part ; not be just an incident. Such a nice little part as Rosella's, for instance.

She glanced thoughtfully at Miss Rodwell, taking that young lady's measure. She decided the Rodwell looked rather soft ; she might be shifted—who knew ?

She also considered Miss Cording.

Claudina was a pretty big part, to be sure, but no bigger than several that she, Psyche, had played at school. She had no doubt that she could take it on if only she had the time.

She would try for the understudy, at any rate. She thought Orde would be quite happy to have such a thing to offer her.

She turned the leaves of her script, searching for likely places where (in the event of her not getting Rosella) she might be introduced in the character (whatever it should be) which Orde was going to provide. She was very happy. She delighted in this big, bare, tawdry room, with its dirty walls and floor and cracked mirrors and shrouded chandeliers. This was the real theatre atmosphere that she was breathing at last. The other day it had all seemed so curious and unusual, but to-day she felt quite at home. She had her contract, she was an actress.

It was wonderful.

And she had done this thing on her own. She had said she would, and she had. That Linda !

And that Hoffman ! Oh, she understood why he had made business for himself in another room with the chorus. He couldn't bear to see *her* here ; that was it.

As for Orde, he seemed a decent sort of ass, only almost too easy. He was evidently up to the eyes in love with her and would do exactly as she wished. Oh, she had made very sure of Orde at that Criterion lunch with Cust. Yes. Cust had earned his fifty quid. She was much obliged to Cust.

Poor old Hoffman ! What a time he was going to have of it !

Orde was hers to do with as she pleased. He was going to give her some lines in a day or two, when the rehearsals had got going, and he had as good as promised her a dance.

She had suggested it for the opening of the second act—even with Orde one had to go a little slow—when the chorus was discovered revelling in honour of the prince's visit to Capri; but she had no doubt that she would be able to get it put in where the prince made his big entrance and the tarantella was to be done. After the tarantella, or just before, which would be best?

She must consult Burke about this.

She sat hugging herself.

III

Michael came in, passed her without a glance at her, crossed the hall to the table and spoke to Orde. After a little talk Orde got up and the two men came towards her where she sat by the door.

As they approached her Orde smiled protectingly, but Michael's face was like a stone. Psyche said, "Mr. Orde." Orde stopped, but Michael went straight on and out of the room.

"Well, Miss Psyche," said Orde in his most kind voice, "and what can we do for you?"

"Sit down a moment," she said, "I want to talk to you."

"I'm afraid," he said, "I'm wanted in the other room. There's a line or two in the chorus stuff that wants doctoring—they're waiting for me."

"Well," she said, "let them wait. Don't I tell you that I want to talk to you? Of course, if you'd rather——"

"Oh, don't say that," he murmured, sitting down; "you know it's not a question of what I'd rather do. If I had my own way I'd sit here all the time. But Hoffman and Plock can't get on without me. They're hung up."

"I wanted to ask you," she said, ignoring his explanation, "if you've got a name for my part yet. It must be a very pretty name, you know."

"Why," said Orde relieved, "here," and he pulled out a slip of paper, "is a small list of names I've made for you to choose from. Look 'em through while I'm in the other room, and let me know if you like any of them when I come back."

Psyche didn't take the paper. "Oh," she said coldly, "it's of no consequence. Off with you, Mr. Orde. Of course I understand that the chorus rehearsal is *important*." She turned her shoulder to him.

Orde got up. "You do believe," he said anxiously, "that I have to go, don't you?"

Psyche made no answer. She appeared to be absorbed in Burke's manipulation of Mr. English Lang, Mr. Bellamy Frodsham, and Miss Jane Wheelan.

"Hang it all, Psyche!" he said, "be reasonable." He was aware that several people were observing him.

The door opened and Michael appeared. "Orde!" he said, "we're waiting, you know." He held the door open invitingly. Michael cared nothing for the company. They might think what they pleased. His business was to get Orde to the chorus rehearsal quickly.

Orde turned away and went out of the room. Confound the girl! *He'd* show her, silly little fool!

Round the walls heads came together, and Miss Queenie Rodwell squeaked with laughter at something old Joe Chatterton had said. Burke turned and regarded her steadily for three seconds, and Miss Rodwell was furious with old Joe for making her laugh. Burke's eye was a very uncomfortable thing to encounter, believe me.

Psyche, after a moment's thought, rose and slipped out through the door. When she came back she carried a paper bag.

IV

A quarter of an hour later Orde came back into the room. He was for the moment greatly relieved to find that Psyche had changed her place. She no longer sat by the door, but over in the corner diagonally opposite to it. He had been troubling himself unnecessarily as to how he was to get past her to the table. He went to his chair, sat down, and began to pretend to be writing something. He did his very best to seem absorbed, but he was uneasily aware that the company had its eyes on him, and he doubted if they were deceived. He felt sure that they were awaiting the developments of the tiff they had witnessed.

He found it impossible to keep his eyes from travelling now and then to the corner where Psyche sat, and every time they rested on her they stayed longer. Psyche never looked up once from her script ; Orde's eyes were never required to dart suddenly away ; and presently they remained permanently on the girl. He had forgotten the company ; the doings of Burke, and of the artists whom Burke was drilling, had no power to distract his attention from her.

He must make it up at lunch.

V

At one o'clock Burke, having chewed six toothpicks away, dismissed the rehearsal for an hour.

The morning's work had been satisfactory. (This, I am

sure, you will be glad to know.) They had walked and read through all the dialogue of the first act, with the exception of the boy-brigands' conspiracy scene. Only five of the eight boy-brigands had, so far, been engaged by Cust, and until their number should be complete Burke could do nothing useful with them.

The artists had proved intelligent and (particularly Mr. Hearn) alert. At present Burke asked no more of them than this. It was just the dry bones of the production that he was knocking together to-day ; there was time enough for his people to show what their acting could do to put life into the thing. Except those of Mr. Lushington, the producer knew the capacities of them all (the little Van Loo did not count yet), and Lushington shaped well. Yes, Burke was well pleased.

Old Joe Chatterton had suggested several excellent wheezes which Burke, after formally consulting Orde, had allowed him to write into his part.

And the blue-pencil (the comedian's friend, we call it in the musical comedy world) had dealt severely with Orde's love-passages ; and Orde had proved most tractable.

Burke saw that Orde was going to be a good boy. From the producer's point of view Orde was showing himself an almost ideal author, that is to say, an author who could look on at the wholesale cutting of his love-scenes and say, "Certainly ! Certainly ! "

The little Van Loo was the only cloud on the horizon of Burke's sunny sky. He knew the possibilities of trouble that lurked in a face like hers ; Orde was the financier of the show, and Orde had already spoken to him about introducing a small part for Miss Van Loo. Burke was only waiting for the Van Loo complications to begin. Meanwhile he chewed toothpicks and got on with his work.

"We'll stop till two o'clock," he announced, and taking off his hat mopped his glistening forehead as he returned to the table. "Hutton," he said, "send me in a sandwich and a milk and soda from 'The Place Opposite.' I'm going to see how Mr. Hoffman's been getting along." He left the room among the mimes, who were already in full flight for the street. Hutton and Frere slipped out quickly.

Orde and Cust were left at the table. Psyche stayed in her corner.

"What about lunch?" said Cust, who, not hopefully, aspired to feed at Orde's expense.

"Don't wait for me, Cust," said Orde. "I've got some verses to fair-copy for Plock."

Cust had thought as much. He got up, like a wise man, and made his departure. To-day he must pay for his own lunch.

Orde went straight over to Psyche.

"Well," he said, "is it to be Belini's as before, or would you rather take a cab down to the Carlton?"

She looked up with a surprise which, though passably acted, was, of course, quite ridiculous. "Dear me," she said, "is that you, Mr. Orde? I thought you were too busy to talk to me."

"Silly girl," he said indulgently, smiling down on her.

She turned her back on him.

"Come along, Psyche," he whispered, and he permitted himself to touch a curl beside her ear.

"Oh," she said without moving, "don't let *me* keep you."

"Rats!" he said, "I couldn't help it. I had to go and give Hoffman his lines."

"Perhaps he wants some more by this time," she said sweetly. "Hadn't you better go and see?"

"No," he said, refusing to be snubbed; "if he wants any more he can come and ask for them. Now, you're coming out to lunch with me."

"Oh dear, no, Mr. Orde."

"Oh dear, yes, Miss Van Loo."

"No, I say."

Orde weakened. "Don't be cross, Psyche," he pleaded. "I honestly couldn't help it."

"You surely don't think I'm cross, Mr. Orde?" she asked with wide eyes. "What on earth should I be cross about? Do you think I don't understand that your business is *important* to you? Do you fancy that I want you to neglect it for *me*? What a strange idea!"

"Look here, Psyche," he said, "I'm sorry. I can't say any more than that. But I have to attend to things

as they arise. I can't hang up a chorus rehearsal when they want lines. Do be reasonable."

"Oh," she said, "but my dear Mr. Orde, that's just what I'm trying to be. Don't I tell you that I understand perfectly? That's why I want you to go and see if they don't, perhaps, want some more lines."

"Come," he said, "we'll go through that list of names and try to find a pretty one for you, though there isn't a pretty enough one in the whole Italian language. And we'll talk about your part. Have you any ideas for it?"

"Oh no," she said, "none. And I don't care what name you choose in the least. Why should I? It isn't as if I was going to act in your play, you know."

Orde paled; then he flushed and fought down an inclination to box her ears.

"All right," he said angrily, "have it your own way." He walked to the door and opened it. "Are you coming?" he asked, turning. It was his ultimatum. He saw that she had produced a paper bag from somewhere and had taken out of it a bath bun. Before replying she made a large bite at her bun, then, with her mouth full, she said, "No, Mr. Orde, I'm lunching here, thanks very much." He strode back to her side, plucked the bun out of her hand and threw it across the room.

"I'm hanged if you are!" he said.

"Oh," she complained, "how tiresome of you! Now I shall have to go and get another bun." And she put her head back at a most becoming angle and laughed in his face, showing her lovely little teeth to the very best advantage.

"Psyche," he cried, "come to lunch. Say you forgive me, and come to lunch. I can't bear to be bad friends with you, Psyche." He caught her by the hand.

"Oh," she said, "I don't want to be bad friends with anybody. Whatever makes you think—" She broke off, for Burke had come into the room.

"Good!" said the producer, not in the least embarrassed because he had found Orde clutching the little Van Loo by the hand; "you've not gone yet, old boy. I say, come into the other room for five minutes. Mikky wants your help again."

"Half a minute, Burke," said Orde.

"Right, sonny," said Burke, and went out whistling. The cloud had risen considerably above the producer's horizon.

Psyche was much obliged to Burke. Instantly she had changed her tactics.

"Well?" she asked. It was *her* ultimatum.

"They can all go to the devil," said Orde, "if you'll come out to lunch."

She jumped up at once. "It shall be the Carlton," she said. "Just take this script for me, will you? I've found one or two places where I can dance."

CHAPTER XXVI

I

THE anxiety for Psyche which Linda had expressed to Michael was natural but needless. Some people don't have to learn their way about ; they find it by instinct. Psyche was one of these.

Three months earlier she had complained to Linda that she was ignorant ; but this was not because she was innocent. Had she been innocent, indeed, she wouldn't have known that she was ignorant. It was experience only that she lacked, and she ached to acquire it. She had come out of her Eastbourne school eager to match herself against the monster Man, her eyes quite open to the dangers of the attempt, her heart high to confront them, her wits keen to elude them. Long before her school-days ended she had discovered that she pleased the adversary's eye. No matter with which girl she walked when the crocodile was making its way to the playing field, there was but one of her pair at whom the men looked. And several of those men were regular to meet the crocodile. Psyche learned to wait for their glances ; she enjoyed appearing not to notice that these persons existed. By the age of fourteen she had no doubts concerning her power to make men look at her.

Long, then, before Linda came to Pontefract Terrace Psyche had been in full possession of a piece of knowledge priceless to any young woman who means to make her way in the world. Her six months in London had by no means tended to weaken her belief in her own powers to attract. Yet she was still horribly afraid of men ; she was not at all sure of what they might be capable. Still her heart

beat furiously when she fancied that she was being followed in the street, and on several occasions she had taken refuge in a cab, giving, you may be sure, a false address in a loud voice, and only changing her order to the driver when she was reluctantly convinced that she had escaped pursuit. It was an exciting life that the little creature led out of doors.

But still nothing like an adventure came her way. She was content that it should be so. The harmless terrors of imagination were still too fresh and delightful to make her wish to exchange them for anything more dangerous, if even more stimulating. Unconsciously she husbanded her stock of sensation, toying with these unreal alarms until they should become tasteless.

I don't know how long they would have continued to satisfy the curious girl, how long she could have resisted the fearful temptation to allow somebody to speak to her in the street, had not Linda's arrival turned her thoughts at last definitely in another direction. I mean the stage. Here was a field of adventure much more promising than Whiteley's or Kensington Gardens or Bond Street ; and, as Psyche intended, much safer. To attack the stage alone seemed a desperate business—so dreadfully wicked its atmosphere was understood by her to be. But with Linda's good friend Hoffman to look after her it would be a different affair altogether. Under his care she might enter that perilous world and dwell in it scathless, until she should have time to learn how to place her feet for herself. She did not doubt that she would very quickly be able to walk alone ; but, for the first of it, she felt the advisability of a support.

She discovered at length, as you have seen, that Linda's good friend Hoffman was not to be induced to lend his aid to her pretty scheme. By this time, however, Psyche was so thoroughly determined to go on the stage that she could not let this disappointment stand in her way. Nay, it only stimulated her to a more vigorous resolve. She had a new purpose to serve now. To her appetite for adventure had been added a craving for revenge, and against their combined forces her vague and shamefaced fears proved impotent. The last did indeed suggest the cab

whistle, but the other two brought her to Mr. Sutton's office.

There she learned, to her chagrin, that it is possible for a girl to be alone in a room with a man and to emerge with the memory of nothing more alarming than a cut-and-dried talk on business. From this moment the burden of the cab-whistle and of all that it meant ceased to incommodate the operations of Psyche.

Her interview with Michael was in its way equally informing. He gave her a new type of encounter. She had quarrelled with him, stood up to him, told him her opinion of him. He had beaten her in the end with his piano, but she had given him a nasty scratch or two. She had learned that men can be driven into a furious rage without venting it on a girl in personal violence.

Cust had proved to her that all men can be bought. This, indeed, she had suspected, because on more than one occasion she had bought her father's butler, Anthony ; but she had not been sure if people above the station of servants were amenable to the money argument. Cust had shown her that they were.

From Orde she had acquired a still more valuable piece of knowledge. In the course of their first lunch with Cust she had discovered that Orde was anxious to please her and would do it at the price of treachery to his collaborator. For Psyche—on Cust's advice—had made no secret of Michael's refusal to have her in his company. Cust, towards the end of the meal, had given her the hint to bring it into their talk. Cust knew when this had become a safe thing to do, and Psyche had not been at that time entirely able to conduct her battles alone.

But by the end of that luncheon she had no more use for Cust. She was quite satisfied to run Orde single-handed.

So, within that wonderful week, the girl grew up several years, and when after the first rehearsal she jumped out of Orde's cab at the Carlton, she had not a terror in the world. She had Hoffman beaten, Cust her obedient humble servant, and Orde exactly where she wanted him. Psyche was all right.

II

What Orde and Psyche said to each other over their lunch at the Carlton need not very seriously concern us. She was no doubt very amusing, and he was, it is certain, extremely gallant and complimentary. It is also highly probable that he thought himself very much more in luck than he was. The truth is that Orde had some totally wrong ideas in his head concerning his companion. He thought her, for instance, adorable. He also thought her a vain little simpleton. He also thought that if he should give her ambition a small amount of flattery he could do just what he liked with her. Psyche clearly understood his estimate of her, and with the peculiar unscrupulousness of youth fed it busily. She let him order all the most expensive dishes. She let him call her Psyche, she let him squeeze her hand, she let him buy her a big bunch of carnations, she let him tell her that she was the loveliest and dearest girl in the world, and she enjoyed it all to the last millimetre of her capacity. She found it wonderfully exciting. This was infinitely better than messing about with paints in the den.

She knew all about Orde and just how to keep him busy and guessing. She felt herself the complete master of this good-looking, amorous, wealthy, pleasant, easy person. She knew that he imagined that he could do just what he pleased with her, and she put her tongue in her cheek ; she knew that, on the contrary, she could do precisely what she wished with him. He was her dog. Since ten minutes past one he had been her dog—to whistle here and there.

What she would do with him ultimately she had not decided. For the present he could make himself very useful by writing in a nice little part for her. She was not nearly square yet with Hoffman.

After their costly little meal they went into the lounge

to smoke and consider the script with a view to the introduction of Miss Van Loo's dances.

Having got Orde on the run, Psyche had no idea of letting him slacken the pace. An hour earlier there had been some vague understanding between them as to a dance. Now they spoke of her "dances," and turned the script through for situations worthy of her acceptance. Psyche showed no disposition to be anything but fastidious.

By half-past two they had found four or five places where Psyche thought she might, with advantage, appear. They had settled the name of the small character which Miss Van Loo was to play. It was *La Giaconda*. These things done, Psyche took Orde back to the rehearsal. She had gone far enough for to-day.

They found the rehearsal in full swing ; Burke was not the man to wait for any author-capitalist to get done lunching with a little monkey like Van Loo. Burke was busy.

Orde, uncomfortably, and Psyche, delightedly, aware of the company's interest, went back to their places, he at the table, she in her corner. Burke never looked at them—he was roughing out a scene between his two principal comedians, Giovanni, the head of police, and Gisco, the boy-brigand chief—but he caught old Joe Chatterton's eye and, without a word, these two experienced men fully exchanged their views on the situation.

Cust spoke to Orde and Orde went out of the hall again. Psyche knew that he had gone to give Hoffman the chorus lines he needed—the lines for which she had kept him waiting an hour and three quarters. She smiled, conning her script.

Had she known what had been happening at Pontefract Terrace that morning she would have smiled still more happily. But she was quite as happy as was desirable.

CHAPTER XXVII

I

FOR, about the same time that Psyche had been bearing off Orde from the Paganini Rooms to their Carlton lunch, Linda had been leaving No. 108 Pontefract Terrace, discharged from her employment. The events which led up to this unfortunate culmination were as follows.

When the clock on the mantelpiece struck one, Linda, according to custom, put down her book and rose.

"Till three, then, Miss Brook," said, according to custom, the Student of Anglo-Saxon Fiction.

Linda took a deep breath. She knew what she was going to risk.

"Mr. Whittaker," she said.

"Miss Brook?"

"Some time ago," she said, "I spoke to you about Psyche.

"And I desired you," he said, "not to do so again."

"I know you did," said Linda, "but I've got to. This is serious, Mr. Whittaker. That other time I was only sorry for her; now I'm afraid for her. You *must* let me speak."

"Perhaps, Miss Brook," he said, "you may remember that on that first occasion I offered you a little advice and a warning."

Linda paled. "Yes," she said.

"I may say," he said, "that I do not propose to warn you again. This is the second time, and twice is enough. Of course, if you insist——"

" You mean that if I insist you will discharge me ? "

" You will be discharging yourself, Miss Brook. I do not wish to part with you. You have been punctual and diligent, and have learned to read very well. I have no wish to get a new reader. The matter rests entirely with you."

" Nevertheless," said Linda, " I *will* speak. I don't care to earn money at that price. Mr. Whittaker, you've *got* to look after Psyche more than you do. She's in great danger just now."

" Very good, Miss Brook," he said with a patient sigh. " I see that all my consideration is to go for nothing with you. You must have your own way, I suppose, but you understand that you are no longer in my employment."

" Yes," she said. " Now then, will you listen to me ? "

" Proceed, Miss Brook, proceed." He folded his hands upon his stomach, resigning himself to her pleasure.

" Very well," said Linda. " Then this is what you've got to know. Psyche is going on the stage."

" Yes, Miss Brooke ? "

" My good man," she snapped (for she was discharged), " don't you hear what I'm telling you ? " He gave no sign of resenting the form of address chosen by his late reader.

" Quite, Miss Brook," he said. " Perfectly. It appears that Psyche is going on the stage. Indeed, she had the condescension to tell me so yesterday. She does it with my full approval. The stage ? Why, I should say the stage is a capital place for her."

" But, Mr. Whittaker," Linda cried, " you don't realise what you are saying. It is the worst place in the world for her."

" Oh, come, Miss Brook ! The stage ? Surely not. A noble profession."

" Not for Psyche," said Linda.

" And why not for Psyche, pray ? "

" Because Psyche's—well, she's weak ; she's no ballast. Anything may happen to Psyche if she goes on the stage. Why, already there's a man who's been much too attentive to her. Mr. Whittaker, it's madness to let her do this."

"And how do you suggest that I am to prevent it, Miss Brook?"

"Forbid her."

"Hah! hah!" said Mr. Whittaker. It was the nearest thing to a laugh that Linda had ever heard him utter.

"If she won't obey, stop her allowance," said Linda. "She's only wanting excitement because she's bored at home. She won't go on with it if she thinks you'll make things unpleasant for her."

"Miss Brook," he said, "I try to think as little about Psyche as possible. With my monthly cheque and such small unavoidable intercourse as comes our way I have done with her. I have no reason to conceal the fact that I dislike her intensely and that she detests me. She has never made one single attempt to be dutiful. As a baby she cried at the sight of me. We have never been anything to one another. I regard her as a stranger to whom ordinary humanity compels me to afford house-room and pocket-money. She is absolutely free to do what she pleases."

"To make a wreck of her life, for instance?" cried Linda, hot with indignation.

"Perfectly," said Whittaker. "She has made a wreck of mine. Her mother——" he checked. "But that is rather beside the question, Miss Brook," he continued. "Have you anything more to say?"

"Only," said Linda, "that I consider you abominable."

To this Mr. Whittaker made no reply whatever.

"And suppose," said Linda, "what I fear happens? Suppose Psyche does make a mess of things? What will you do, then?"

"Of course," he said, "my protection is not for her in every event. If her desire to be unfettered leads her beyond a certain point, she will know when she has passed it. Till then, what she does is no concern of mine."

Linda stared at him, trying to realise that things like this could be said.

"I believe," she cried suddenly; "I believe you *want* her to go wrong. You don't care *how* you get rid of her."

Again he was silent, but he put the tips of his thumbs and fingers together and moved them apart again, two or three times—like a stage curate.

"But have you no care for your own reputation?" Linda cried, resolved to try all things. "Your family——"

"Oh," he said, "my family!"

"Yes," she cried, "what will they think of it? And of you?"

"My family!" he said again, and that was all.

"Yes," cried Linda, "all you want is to get her off your hands!"

Again he tip-fingered in silence.

"Oh!" said Linda furiously.

"Since you are leaving my service," he said, "I need not trouble you with my views upon your conduct. My termination of your employment here supplies its own commentary. I owe you, however, three shillings. You will remember that you were engaged only by the hour."

"You can keep your dirty money," said Linda. "I'm sorry I ever handled any of it. You beastly man!"

She jerked the door open and it slammed behind her. Mr. Whittaker rang the bell for his luncheon.

II

Linda made a cheap lunch in Westbourne Grove off a bun and a cup of coffee. Then she inquired for the nearest free library and spent an hour hunting through advertisement columns. She had no time to lose in finding a new employment.

Though that day at Haslemere had lightened her heart in many ways, it had very seriously affected the state of her finances. Her repayment of Michael's loans had, in short, lessened very considerably her deposit at the savings-bank. Since then a fortnight had gone by, and though in that time Linda had received sixty-six shillings she had paid

out seventeen of them in rent, and she had also been at the expense of a good deal of food. Nor had she been entirely economical. Secure in her belief that thirty-three shillings were going to be paid to her by Mr. Whittaker on every future Saturday until she should be pleased to put an end to the arrangement, she had on two or three rainy days travelled to Bayswater by train, twice she had bought peppermints, and once a quite unnecessary neck-tie for Michael.

She calculated that, with the money in her purse and the balance to her credit at the savings-bank, she would be able to hold out for about four weeks—perhaps five. During that time she must find a job or again draw on Michael, and she did not propose to draw on Michael if she could help it. Michael had anxieties enough for the moment ; she must not add to them. True, Psyche might be little beast enough to tell him, when she should find out, but until then she, Linda, would do nothing to trouble Michael with her affairs. It would be time enough for her to tell Michael when this production was over ; and then it would not matter. Then the royalties would be beginning to roll in ; then he and she would be getting ready to marry. Oh ! in five weeks' time they would be able to laugh at Whittaker together. But just now—no ; Michael must not be worried.

Meanwhile, therefore, she must find a job, or go short of food ; for it was impossible to change her quarters without exciting Michael's suspicions. Eight shillings and sixpence each Monday during the next five weeks she must produce at the office of Adelaide Buildings. For the rest she must do as well as she could. Bread was fairly cheap, at any rate ; and it was summer.

So for an hour she pored over newspapers, noted some addresses, and at last left the library and walked to Westminster, where she found that the place had been filled that morning. Then she walked into Southwark and thence to Clapham. It was all fine exercise for Linda, but it proved its own reward.

III

Michael, when he found her already at table in their Oxford Street restaurant, thought that she looked very white and tired. He supposed the heat had tried her. He was sufficiently tired himself, for besides conducting the best part of a day's chorus-rehearsal he had given two music lessons, and for that purpose had made two long excursions from the Paganini Rooms. Had Plock been a less competent teacher Michael would have had to abandon his pupils altogether, but almost the only thing for which he was grateful to Cust was the engagement of Plock. If Plock had been a fool Michael's position would have been really desperate ; for if he had been compelled to give up his lessons and his hack-work for publishers (he could do this at night, you know), he would have been in the situation of a card-player who is forced to play, for everything he possesses, a hand in which he has no confidence.

Cust, Orde, and Psyche had between them slain poor Michael's hope for "The Conspiracy." Let his music be as good as he thought it, let Orde put a million to the credit of the production, let old Joe Chatterton be as funny as he pleased and Burke as able as a producer can be, Michael could no longer hope that the play would succeed. He knew that the foundations of his success were rotten ; he had discovered treachery there. Against Psyche's lovely face, how should a poor musician, bound by Orde's contract, struggle at all ? Yet struggle he must for his dear music's sake. That should be saved, as far as might be done, from the general wreck which threatened. It might win him a few good notices ; some manager might ask him to call.

And the royalties—the royalties he had boasted about to Linda at Haslemere ? Well, he might, with luck, draw royalties on empty houses for a week.

Michael, I think, took at this time an unnecessarily

gloomy view of his chances. Psyche, on this twenty-third of August, threatened them only a little. So far as he knew she was to do no more than show her face to the public, speak two or three words, and have her name on the bill. On the strength of so little he oughtn't to have despaired so soon of his poor play, one would think. But as a man is sanguine, so is he ready to despair. Michael had risen high on the wings of Confidence and Hope, and the moment the first deserted him the other proved unequal to the work of support, and Michael fell like a stone. He knew too well what can happen when a pretty girl gets the management by the ear.

Yet, as he walked to their restaurant he succeeded in preparing a cheerful face for Linda. He had grumbled to Linda enough the day before, and he meant to do no more of it. It wasn't fair to plague her with his forebodings. She led a sufficiently harassing existence at Whit-taker's without being teased with another person's anxieties when her day's work was over. And Linda could do nothing any more than he could. She couldn't, for instance, persuade Psyche to give up her intention of acting in "*The Conspiracy at Capri*." Had there been the remotest chance of anything so desirable, Linda must, of course, be told that the girl was becoming a danger. Too much depended on the play to neglect any opportunity of making it a success. But Psyche was beyond Linda's influence now; always had been, for that matter. No, he must keep these things from Linda as long as possible. It would be time enough to tell her that the play was a failure when the curtain should have fallen on it and the audience should begin to express its disapproval. And who knew? Between this and the opening night many things might happen. Orde and Psyche might quarrel, for instance.

IV

Linda looked up as he approached her table and smiled in response to his smile. "Well," she said, "how's it going?"

"Oh," he said, "pretty good. We've got through the first two acts to-day, and Burke's quite pleased. And that chorus of Cust's isn't half as bad as I expected. I've got their music down to their level without doing it very much harm, and they're going to sing it quite decently. Plock's a pretty bright boy. I think our end of the show'll be all right. And we've got old Chatterton, as you know, to help the book. He's a pretty strong card. He'll make them laugh all right."

"Good," said Linda; "and Psyche?"

"Oh," he said, "Psyche's on the scene, of course! But *she*'s not going to matter. She's scored—let it go at that—and I hope the boys in the stalls'll be pleased with her. They've given her a name, it seems—La Giacinda. They'll put her on the bill as that, and she'll be perfectly happy walking across the stage half a dozen times. You'd better have some red wine, Linda; you look a bit played out, dear."

"No," said Linda; "I'm all right. It's just the heat."

"Yes," he said, "it's no weather for Christians to be in London. But we'll have wine all the same," and he gave his order.

"How's the fiction-swallower?" he asked afterwards. "Pretty tiresome to-day, thank you?"

"Not so tiresome to-day as usual," said Linda.

"Good," said Michael. "That man wants stifling, but he pays regular. We can't afford to do without him at present. As soon as he's provided your trousseau I shall have much pleasure in calling upon him one afternoon and murdering him."

Linda pretended to be amused, and until their food came

they discussed (with much hearty laughter from Michael) methods of putting an end to Mr. Whittaker. Michael was delighted to find her so responsive to his nonsense. That reading was a weary business for her, but once over for the day it could be dismissed easily from the mind ; it had that merit. It wasn't like play-production, which could only be kept at a distance, even while a man dined with his sweetheart, by a resolute and perpetual exercise of the will.

Linda was greatly pleased to see him in such good spirits. Evidently, as he said, things were going well at the Paganini Rooms. Psyche's intrusion was of no importance, she wasn't going to hurt the play. Michael, with all this anxiety and responsibility on his shoulders, could never manage to talk nonsense about Whittaker's murder unless things were going extremely well.

"Michael," she said presently, "what are the royalties on a play like yours worth ? "

"Eh ? " he cried.

"At Haslemere," she said, "you gave me to understand that there was an enormous lot of money in a successful play. But how much, for instance ? Roughly, you know."

Michael, inwardly cursing himself, considered what he should say.

"You spoke," Linda went on, "of royalties rolling in from every part of the civilised world. It was a giddy vision. I've been wondering ever since what sort of a sum it represented. Would it be as much as five thousand pounds, now ? "

He laughed. Her estimate was so grotesquely little. As an outside figure for a world's return to the composer of a successful musical play she gave his earnings during a part only of the London run.

"My dear," he said, "your brain's giddy, indeed. Five thousand pounds ! Why, it's a fortune, Linda. I'm afraid you must come down a bit in your ideas."

"I only wanted to know," she said.

"Call your thousands hundreds," he said.

"I see," she replied, perfectly satisfied. "That's a good deal, too."

"Yes," he said.

He lied to save her from a monstrous disappointment as he lied to save her from a monstrous anxiety. These two had a good deal to learn. Michael honestly believed that Linda would rather suppose the production to be going well, and that they stood to win only a few hundred pounds, than hear the truth from him at any cost to herself. Linda with equal sincerity imagined that she was doing Michael a kindness by suppressing the news of her dismissal from Pontefract Terrace. And because ignorance is the mother of suffering they suffered for what they did.

Linda, for instance, began without delay to suggest delightful methods of spending that very large sum of money—five hundred pounds, no less—which was to come to them by reason of a successful “Conspiracy at Capri”; and Michael, on two occasions during the evening, openly thanked his stars that Linda was provided at this critical period with a comfortable berth. So they suffered, but they were brave, poor souls, and kept up each the illusion which dwelt in the other’s mind; and when they separated each was fairly happy on the other’s account.

And next day Linda went job-hunting—to fail; and Michael went to the Paganini Rooms to be told by Burke that *La Gioconda* was to have a dance put in just before the tarantella.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I

IT might be instructive, but I am afraid that it would be tedious to follow step by step the advance of *La Giaconda* (that small dancing part) towards prominence in the production of the "Conspiracy at Capri," and to examine minutely the results of that advance. I do not love the spectacle, nor do I think that the appetite for it of your eyes is any keener than my own. Why, then, should we go beyond the strictly necessary over so miserable a business? I have set Psyche's resolute little feet upon the direct path to "the fat," I have shown you her eager little hands curved to snatch all she can get of it, and I have indicated Orde as (in terms) a willing dispenser of the desired commodity. It has now become a question merely of how much, without paying for it, Psyche can grab in the time that is at her disposal; of how far Orde is ready to heap her plate on credit; of which, in a word, is the cleverer.

We are not Michael, with all his future at stake; we are not Burke, cynically entertained one minute and seriously concerned the next for his reputation as a producer; we are not Cust, solely interested to make as much money as possible out of the production, regardless of its success, regardless of what happens to the little Van Loo, regardless of everything but Orde's willingness to spend; we are not Plock and Hutton, finding in Orde and his little friend food for their young horrible laughter; nor are we members of the company, regarding with anxious eyes the tumbling to bits of a promising little show, the approaching dead loss of several unpaid weeks of rehearsal. To all these people

Orde is, for the time, the most important person in the world ; Psyche the most dangerous. No wonder—and small blame to them—they watch narrowly the destructive progress of *La Giaconda*.

But you and I are not bound to a rehearsal-room for seven weary hours a day with nothing seriously to excite our interest save the goings-on of the "guv'nor." God forbid, therefore, that we should witness more of them than we need.

But a few glimpses are necessary.

II

During the luncheon interval, at the second rehearsal, Burke told Michael that Orde wanted a little solo dance put in just before the tarantella in the second act. Burke left Michael to guess who was to dance this solo, and he said nothing about the small part for *La Giaconda* (which Orde had just given him) of two lines in the first act opening, one line at the prince's entrance in the second act, and a shriek in the third act. The producer was not anxious to heap too much on poor old Mikky all at once. The dance before the tarantella was quite as much as Mikky was likely to stand for the present.

"My dear man," said Michael very quietly, "don't you know that I work up to that tarantella for five minutes of solid music ? Any solo dance in that place'll kill the tarantella stone dead—even if Pavlova does it. And I've not heard that she's likely to be engaged."

"No," said Burke. "I needn't tell you who's to do it."

"You needn't," said Michael. "I suppose you spoke to Orde like a father."

"I did my best for you, Mikky," said Burke. "But

it's no go. He told me that I wasn't engaged to raise objections, but to produce his play."

"*His* play," said Michael. "Oh, the blighter!"

"After that," said Burke, "there was no more to be said. You see, I've not touched a thing all summer, Mikky."

"Oh, don't apologise, old boy," said Michael, gnawing a thumb-nail. "I'm not blaming you."

"So," said the producer seductively, "we can count on you for a nice little dance-tune to-morrow, eh?"

"No," said Michael, getting up from the table at which they sat.

"No?"

"No, Burke. He's got all the music he'll get from me. Let him do what he likes with it, and be damned to him. He can make me sit by and watch him murder my stuff, but he can't make me give him any more to play the fool with. I'm dried up, laddie." He began to walk about feverishly.

"Oh come," said Burke, following him with his eyes. "One little dance, Mikky."

"No," said Michael, "not one demi-semi-quaver of it."

"Old boy," said the producer after a pause, "don't you see what'll happen?"

"Yes," said Michael stubbornly; "let it happen. I expect Master Plock can oblige all right."

"But Mikky," said Burke, "not just in that place. If the tarantella's to be saved at all, you're the only man who can do it. If we put in a bit of Plock there, it'll knock the whole entrance to blazes." Burke was very anxious to keep his composer, for if Mikky should throw up the game it would be a terrible affair. Michael sat down on the edge of the table.

"Old boy," he said unpleasantly, "there's an Ethiopian minstrel knocking about just now who does most amazing cake-walks. I heard him play once in Cust's office, but I forget his name. Why don't you tell Cust to buy a nice little sand-dance from him, and let La Giaconda do it with an American flag in one hand and a Union Jack in the other. It would be just right in Capri a hundred years ago." He gave a bitter laugh.

"Old boy," said Burke, "I know just how you feel. Orde's got you good and tight, and you can do nothing. I know that. But see here, Mikky, what's the use of letting him have it absolutely all his own way? Your music's your music. It's quite paralysing, most of it. It's good enough to carry this show on its own. Very well, then. The thing you and I have to do is to save the music all we can. Don't let Orde start in with extra musicians. When that kind of thing begins, no one knows where it'll end. I know the merchant you refer to. In his own line he's immense. Now suppose, for example, I took you at your word and we bought a little dance from him? Suppose I let him play some of his things to Orde? Why, he'd sell Orde half a dozen numbers before he got up from the piano. As he plays his stuff there's no resisting it. Just imagine half a dozen rag-time numbers sandwiched in among all your Italian stuff. And that's the sort of thing that may happen if you stand out. For God's sake, don't put your music at Orde's mercy that way! If you won't think of yourself, think of yours truly. I don't mind telling you, Mikky, that I can't afford to chuck this production. And if it's a frost it won't be any good to me, will it? And my panto's fallen through for this Christmas. Be a good boy, Mikky. Think of my kids."

Michael was furious with Burke for dragging in his kids. He was inclined to reply that Burke would do better to think of his kids a little more for himself. If Burke had let the thought of his kids get between him and about two-thirds of the whiskeys which he had consumed during the past ten years, Burke would not now be producing chance musical plays for unknown managements, and his pantomimes would not be falling through. He would be up at the top of the tree instead of—well, instead of where he was.

But kids or no kids, the man spoke sense. This dance had got to be written. By its music "*The Conspiracy*" stood or fell, and its music must be saved as far as was to be done. It would never do to let Plock begin messing things about.

"You shall have your dance, old boy," he said. Burke's big face grew bigger with a delighted smile.

"That's my Mikky," he said. He hoped Mikky would never find out that his panto had not fallen through in the least. Burke didn't mind lying in a good cause, but he didn't want it to be known. However, there was no chance that Mikky would ever find out. Mikky wouldn't be worrying about other people's pantos.

III

Psyche as a dancer, so Michael believed, couldn't do very much harm. She was an amateur, of course ; but nobody would look at her feet very much while they carried her face about the stage. So when a second dance was demanded for La Giaconda, he wrote it without a word of expostulation. He had said his say once to Burke, and he knew that Burke would do all he could to keep La Giaconda down. He didn't think it necessary to waste any more breath over Miss Van Loo's dancing part.

He even produced two excellent dances for her. He hoped that the tarantella would (though the particular effect for which he had tried was ruined) efface the memory of Psyche's faked steps. As for the other dance, it was to be at the very beginning of the play, at which time nothing mattered very much so long as it kept things going till the stalls should fill up.

But when Burke came to him with a new comic duet lyric which Orde had written, and asked him to set it for Giovanni and La Giaconda, Michael struck for the second time.

"They're going too far," he said, "I won't do it."

"Oh, don't say that, Mikky," the producer cooed.

"Have you heard this girl sing ?" asked Michael.

"I've heard her make a few little sounds to music," said

Burke. "She's pretty bad, old boy ; but Old Joe'll carry this duet all right. We don't want a singer with Old Joe."

"So it seems," said Michael.

"Just a little tune, Mikky."

"Not I," said Michael.

"You can do it on top of the piano now," said Burke, "in five minutes."

"Not in a century, old boy ; I won't write songs for her."

"Look here, Mikky——" the producer began in his most winning voice, but Michael stopped him.

"It's no good," he said, "no good at all, Burke. You've wheedled a couple of dances out of me, but that's all even you can do. The girl can do a few steps to my music so's not to be noticed very much ; but when it comes to her singing it, I've got my music to think about. I won't do it."

"But see here, Mikky——"

"No, Burke. Get Plock to indulge her with a melody."

"Oh, Plock be hanged ! We want a *tune* for this thing."

"All right," said Michael suddenly, "I'll write one now."

He left the Paganini Rooms and went into "The Place Opposite." There for half an hour he scribbled in his notebook, with a nasty smile on his face. Then he went back to the rehearsal.

When the chorus and the actors (all but Psyche and Old Joe) had gone, he sat down at the piano. Burke, Orde, Cust, and Psyche grouped themselves round him. Hutton and Plock remained at the table, finishing off their work. Psyche did her best to conceal her exultation, but she failed.

Michael propped Orde's lyric against the music-rest and hit out a few preliminary chords. "Giovanni begins," he said, and sang the lines allotted to the comedian.

The others exchanged glances. This was good, this was lively ; this was catchy ; this was exactly the sort of thing that was wanted. Old Joe's face began to beam. Psyche's was super-triumphant. How she had tamed this musico !

"Now for *La Giaconda*," said Michael, as he played the

half-dozen bars which came between the two parts of the stanza. "She can dance to this, Orde." He followed, pianissimo, with *La Giacinda*'s lines. They were all on one note, and the accompaniment was simple strumming. The compliment to Psyche was sufficiently obvious.

Michael concluded this deplorable performance with a refrain that was as much "a winner" as anything he had yet written for the play. Then he stopped his music and, looking round, "How does that strike you, Orde?" he asked.

Nobody spoke, but Psyche laughed.

Michael got up from the piano. "There's your tune, Orde," he said, and went out of the room.

"Plock," said Cust.

The chorus-master looked up from his writing. "Yes, Mr. Cust?" he said.

"How much of that tune of Mr. Hoffman's can you remember?"

"Pretty well all, I fancy," said Plock.

"Come and try," said Cust.

Thus they got a capital tune for the duet of Giovanni and *La Giacinda*. Plock had no difficulty at all in filling up the strumming gap.

IV

When Burke began to rehearse the little scene between La Giacunda and Giovanni which Orde had written to lead up to their duet, Claudina, otherwise Miss Gracie Cording, assumed an expression of intense surprise which quickly changed to one of violent indignation. Soon Burke out of the corner of his eye observed that Miss Cording was engaged in a bout of hot whispering with Miss Jane Wheelan, his female comedian, sustainer of that important rôle, Gilda. Burke chewed his tooth-pick and went on with his business, preparing himself for trouble. But he did not shrink from the rehearsing, there and then, of the duet. Gracie had better know just what she was up against at once. So when he had got the scene roughly to his liking he called "Duet," and began to instruct Old Joe and Psyche in the business that was to accompany their lines. These lines they read.

Burke at this time tried not to see Miss Cording. He needed all his wits for what he was doing.

"Certainly," he found himself saying to Claudina, an hour later. "Certainly, Miss Cording. As many minutes as you please."

The actors were streaming out to luncheon ; the rest of the management was on its way to "The Place Opposite." Hoffman was in the chorus-room ; Burke felt dreadfully alone. He was glad that the table was between him and Gracie.

"Of course, Mr. Burke," she said icily, "if you wish to get rid of me, you have only to say so."

"My dear Miss Cording——"

"It's no good, Burkie," she said, "you can't bamboozle me, you know."

"Look here, Gracie," he said, "I can't help it. The man's a fool, but it's *his* money. He can do as he pleases."

"Very likely," she said, "but not with *me*. That duet

ought to be *my* duet. It's simply an insult to *me* to give it to this Van Loo thing. Orde can find somebody else to play Claudina."

"My love," purred the poor man, "don't talk nonsense. Your part won't be touched. Indeed, we're thinking of another song for you in Act III."

"Yes, and I expect you'll think a pretty long time, Dick Burke, before I get it. Oh, you can't pull wool over *my* eyes. I've had some in my time already, thanks. The point is, that's *my* duet, and *she*'s got it. I don't need to say any more, I should hope."

Burke wished profoundly that she believed this.

"What can I *do*?" he asked plaintively. "The man won't listen to me. I've warned him over and over again that you wouldn't stand it. But he's just foolish about that girl. Look here, Gracie, I give you my word there shan't be any more of it. I'll frighten him good. I'll tell him you're going to resign. But don't you *do* it. Think where we are in the production. It'll knock the whole show gally-west if you go out now."

"That's what would please me very much," she said. "I don't like this management."

"I wouldn't tell anybody else," said Burke, "but the fact is it'll be a very serious matter to me if this play falls down. I've not been able to fix up my panto this Christmas, Gracie, and——"

"Oh yes," she said, with a laugh, "that's all right, old boy. I know all about your panto that's gone wrong and your starving kids. You worked it on me three years ago, do you remember, in that show of Charlie Sopwith's?"

"Did I?" said Burke, not in the least abashed. "It's a habit, that's what it is."

"It worked then," she said, "but not now, it won't. The charm's evaporated, Dickie. I'm going out."

v

And out she went—not indeed on that day, for Burke did succeed once in soothing her into compliance ; but a week later, when La Giaconda's second singing number was put in.

By this time there was hardly a principal who had not lost one line or more to Psyche's small dancing-part.

Because audiences have last trains to catch and suppers to eat before half-past twelve, curtains must fall not later than a little after eleven. It is impossible, therefore, to expand the book of a musical play indefinitely, and every addition to the part of one character necessarily imposes a reduction in the part of some other. You perceive that La Giaconda could only increase at the expense of somebody else.

Touch an artist's lines and you strike at the root of the man. You may remunerate him poorly, you may speak uncivilly to him, you may work him to death, and all these things shall be forgiven to you ; but if you hope for his affection you must not cut out very many of the lines that you have once given to him, for by speaking his lines he attracts the attention of the public to himself.

For these reasons there is no surer way by which an author can reap unpopularity than by creating a new part after rehearsals have begun, and steadily building it up from day to day. For every line, number, and scene which he adds to it he must take a corresponding amount of time from the rest of the company. Undoubtedly the best way of doing this is to concentrate the trouble by laying hold firmly on one part and reducing it to one line. Then you can go ahead comparatively in comfort. The actors who have not been sacrificed will be quite happy, and the sole victim of your masterly tactics can either endure or resign, it doesn't greatly matter which.

“The Conspiracy at Capri,” however, was not a play

which lent itself to this admirable manœuvre. It had, you may remember, been constructed as a comic opera, and all the characters, however small, were of a certain importance. Rosella, for example, was a small part which in an ordinary musical comedy could have been reduced to vanishing-point without affecting the plot one way or the other. But "The Conspiracy at Capri" could not get on without Rosella at all. She was involved in the intrigue of the play beyond Orde's power to extract her. She had to stay. And so with all the other people.

Orde, therefore, being unable to offer one large murderous dose of poison to one member of his company, was obliged, if he would satisfy Miss Van Loo (and he thought himself obliged to do this), to spread his powder over the tongues of as many people as possible, weakening everywhere rather than slaying in one place.

So every morning and after each luncheon interval some poor artist found himself or herself striking a pencil, at Burke's command, through one or more of those lines which were to him or to her more precious than rubies. Then he or she would go back to the others to grumble.

The thing became, at last, a standing joke among them.

"Whose turn for the guillotine to-day?" they asked one another as they met in the entrance hall of the Paganini Rooms.

And there wasn't a chorister who didn't share the general indignation. The chorus, perhaps, hated Psyche more heartily than the principals. She had begun on their level.

Burke had given up warning Orde that the dry-rot was setting in. He just went on doing his best and obeying instructions.

Michael never left the chorus-room for the Assembly Hall. In the chorus-room, at least, he was master of his destiny. He meant the chorus work to be good, whatever else happened. When Plock was playing the piano for the principals and the hour for one of Michael's music-lessons approached, he gave his chorus a rest, went out, did his business, and returned to find them ready for him—ready to a chorister. They knew all about the relations of Orde and Mr. Hoffman, and because Michael was being badly

treated by the guv'nor, whom they hated, they adored Michael, and for his sake put all their souls into their work.

VI

Miss Cording's resignation gave Orde a bad moment, but Cust pooh-poohed it and went away to the telephone. Five minutes later he returned to say that Miss Lalli Dean, the new Claudina, would be along in half an hour. Cust was pardonably pleased with the resource which he had displayed.

Orde spent the interval in considerably reducing Claudina's part.

Miss Dean, when she arrived, proved to be a middle-aged lady with dyed hair. Orde didn't like her at all and she was sent away, Cust protesting that she had the finest soprano in London. Orde, however, would have none of her. The man had learned the sweet taste of power by this time, and carried himself like the manager of twenty theatres.

Cust had to find another Claudina. This one—a Miss Lovell—was a little more suitable and was engaged; but Bellamy Frodsham, who, as Adolpho, the leading young gentleman of the piece, depended a good deal for his effects on the lady to whom he was to make love, swore loud and deep in "The Place Opposite." Not only had he been very fond of Miss Cording, but she had with her dark hair and eyes made the contrast to his own fair beauty, which he required, whereas Miss Lovell was as fair as himself.

He was so indignant that, if a salary had not been absolutely necessary to him, he too would have resigned, as a protest against the management's unfair treatment of Gracie.

Meanwhile Orde had cut out yet more of Claudina's part.

VII

Orde himself wrote Psyche's second song. He didn't propose, so he told Burke, to give Hoffman any more opportunities to display his malice. Orde was rather pleased with this sentence ; it seemed to him to be very dignified.

The song was about an owl, and it was no more clever than songs about owls usually are. I mean it made the owl advise lovers "to-woo"—you know the sort of thing. Plock put the music into shape for Orde as part of one day's work and orchestrated it as part of another. They stuck it for the time into the third act somewhere or other. It ended with a little "owl" dance : I hope that you can imagine what an "owl" dance is like, but if not, you must excuse me from describing it. I may say, perhaps, that it differs from a "chicken" dance and a "sparrow" dance only in being rather more owlish than they, and a trifle less chickarrovian. Psyche, however, was delighted with it, and practised her steps in a corner of the rehearsal room all day long.

By this time they had got in young Arthur Hawthorne, from The Leslie Theatre, to teach the principals their dance movements. He came for a couple of hours each afternoon, and Psyche took up as much of his time as she could. And he gave her as much of it as he was allowed to do. If it hadn't been for Burke and the other principals, no doubt he would have given her the whole of it.

Orde was so much pleased with his last experiment—I mean Psyche's owl-song—that he cut out Lorenzo's only solo—a military song at the end of the first act—and introduced La Giaconda in that place to sing a song that he had by him called "My Little Dog." This gave him an excuse for presenting Psyche with a toy-dog of appalling ugliness, tufted, whiskery and snub-nosed, which she was to carry on in a vast muff and produce suddenly before the delighted

eyes of the audience. Psyche christened it Bertie, and Orde's hopes rose.

As La Giacinda, Psyche was supposed to be a Capri peasant, but the difficulty of furnishing such a person with a sable muff and a toy-dog was surmounted by taking the song from the end of the first act and putting it into the middle of the second act, and then writing a little scene into the first act, in which the prince offered La Giacinda the position of lady-in-waiting in recompense for the pleasure her dance had given him. As, in the then state of the script, La Giacinda's first dance took place before the prince's entrance it was the simplest thing in the world to put it in afterwards. Now for La Giacinda, once established as a lady-in-waiting, any costume was possible. All this led to the introduction of six ladies-in-waiting into the cast, and the importation of six new, very good-looking young women into the company, and to the writing, by Orde, of an entrance number for these people, leading to La Giacinda's entrance with dog in muff. It was expensive, but it pleased Psyche.

Then Orde, feeling the need of military music somewhere in the play, laid hold again of Lorenzo's song and put it in just after La Giacinda's dance in the second act.

This made it possible to cut out the tarantella altogether, and save the expense of the eight special tarantella dancers for whom they were negotiating with an agent in Naples.

What I have just told you will seem to you to be a little difficult and complicated unless you are familiar with the making of musical plays. For this reason I will not any longer examine the "incubation" of La Giacinda's part. I will content myself by saying that this was only the beginning of it.

VIII

In the fourth week of rehearsals they were at last able to get into The Bath Theatre, where certain alterations had been going on behind the proscenium during the past month.

This meant that Psyche and little dog Bertie and Orde gave up lunching at Belini's and became habitués of the Savoy grill-room.

CHAPTER XXIX

I

MICHAEL was anxious about Linda. Her old white, weary look had returned ; her voice had grown tired again ; and he could not feel that this tiredness was nothing but the wholesome tiredness of a voice that has read Anglo-Saxon fiction all day long. The fatigue that weakened Linda's tones seemed not so much physical as of the soul.

Yet at dinner she always ate with good appetite ; with, indeed, excellent appetite. He did not understand why, if she was getting a solid meal each day at one o'clock and another each evening at seven, she should look so drawn and thin, and seem so listless. He feared all sorts of things —consumption, of course, among them ; but she never coughed. Michael was puzzled and anxious.

He came to the conclusion that her employment and nothing else was the cause of this physical and mental depression. Whittaker was preying on her mind. It was not good for Linda to be reading-machine to an inhuman brute like Whittaker. The society of the man was crushing her. That must be it.

He cursed himself for ever taking her to Pontefract Terrace.

This idea, once planted in his mind, rapidly bore fruit. He proposed to Linda that she should leave Whittaker's employment.

"This job's too heavy for you," he said. "You're getting as thin and white as you were when I met you that day in Oxford Street. Give this man the sack, Linda. We'll be married in a month or so. I don't want you to spend your honeymoon in a hospital."

She smiled. "And how am I to live meanwhile?" she asked.

"Oh," he cried, "don't be silly. Suppose we were married. You wouldn't be asking that then."

"It'd be different then," she said.

"Not it," he said. "What I make won't be yours, when we're married, any more than it is now."

But she only shook her head.

"Then," he said, "let's get married at once. Why ever didn't we think of that before? We might be married now if we had. What asses we've been! It's this confounded production. Somehow it never occurred to me that we could do anything until it was over. See here, Linda, why not marry me at once? Then you can chuck Whittaker."

Again she shook her head. "No," she said, "you get on with your play, Michael, and don't worry about me. I'm all right. This isn't the time to be distracting you with a wedding. You want all your wits about you till the 30th."

He could not persuade her, though he tried for an hour and many times afterwards. The truth is that Linda enjoyed her situation too much to abandon it. For Michael's sake she was living on a few coppers a day; for Michael's sake she suppressed, each evening, a weary tale of a day's fruitless work-hunt; for Michael's sake her cheeks grew thin and white. He must not be worried; all his mind must be given to "The Conspiracy."

Women do these idiotic things, you know.

If she had not believed that her money and Michael's dinners would just enable her to endure until the end of the month, I doubt very much if she could have faced her self-inflicted martyrdom; but her belief that she could succeed made the temptation too great for resistance. If she had been quite certain that she would be able to stay the course, she would, I believe, have rejoiced each time she failed to get a place. Yet the grosser part of her must always have lamented; for at any time, during these weeks, she would have been very glad of a little food more satisfying than bread and cocoa.

And when she went to meet Michael each evening she

could not altogether banish the excitement which the prospect of a dinner occasioned in her bosom, and even while she ate she could not altogether get rid of the effect produced by a long day's failure. She ached to tell him all about it, while, with a foolish feminine rapture, she hugged to her bosom the secret which his anxiety on her account made very sweet.

Michael at length understood that he was wasting his time in trying to get her to marry him before the play should be produced, and he felt bound to admit that she was right. He did need the use of all his wits at present, and their marriage, however simply it might be effected, would rob him of a good deal of time. There would be arrangements to make with the registrar, a home to find (for neither her flat nor his lodgings could accommodate the two of them), their removals to carry out, furniture to buy. On every score but one it was better to wait till his hands should be less tied. That score was Linda's thinness and pallor.

But if she wouldn't she wouldn't, and he couldn't make her.

And her health didn't seem to be seriously affected. She was just run down, that was it. Her long hours of reading in a stuffy room (imagine a fire all through the past August !) had taken it out of her. Whittaker's continual neighbourhood had fretted her nerves away. She would perk up again as soon as she should be removed from Pontefract Terrace, and that would be in a few weeks now. Meanwhile, it was better to let her have her own way.

Perhaps she wanted the money she was and would be earning for her trousseau, poor dear ! He smiled at the vanity of woman.

So, though he was always anxious, he gave up persecuting her to marry him out of hand.

II

Linda, whenever he mentioned Whittaker, changed the subject. This confirmed Michael in his belief that Whittaker was the principal cause of her poor condition. She could no longer make merry over the Student of Anglo-Saxon Fiction. Whittaker, he felt, had become too serious a subject for Linda to jest about. She could not bear to think of him.

She always kept their talk steadily on the play. It seemed to absorb all her interest. Michael wished that he had not in the beginning forced himself to appear so optimistic about "The Conspiracy at Capri." It would be a good deal easier for him now, while everything connected with the play was going to the devil together, to answer Linda's questions. But, on the other hand, the good account of rehearsals which he gave her each evening obviously cheered her up. He felt that when he bade her good-night at her door he had given her something to help her through her next lonely, tiring, unhappy day.

But he never lost an opportunity of preparing her for the disappointment which, he felt certain, was in store for her. He preached continually the folly of building on a success for "The Conspiracy."

"The fact is, Linda," he would say, "that a play by two unknown men, produced by an unknown management, doesn't stand very much chance. It's got to be something extraordinary to hit the public at once. Now, if Foscari was doing 'The Conspiracy' at The Broadway there'd be thousands of people wanting to see it, simply because it was the new show at The Broadway. There's a theatre with a record and a reputation. But The Bath has nothing of that kind to recommend 'The Conspiracy' to the public, and nobody's even heard of this management. London'll be *expecting* the thing to fail, and it's got to be something monstrously good to stand up against that."

And again he would tell her, "Orde's got plenty of coin, but I doubt if he'll care to lose very much of it. This production's going to cost him every bit of seven thousand, and if the show isn't a success from the word 'go' he'll not feel inclined to keep on throwing good money after bad in the hope of getting it all back. I mean he'll probably cut his loss and clear out of management after a week or so. And I won't blame him. You can fan a play sometimes, by papering and advertisement, until you can put out 50th performance bills, and then people may begin to be curious to see the thing, and begin to pay to come in, but that's always a doubtful game, and when your play's got a salary list like 'The Conspiracy' it means a pretty big expense to run it for a month or more without getting anything into the box-office. And advertising isn't done for nothing. No, Linda, don't count any chickens."

"But," Linda would say, "it's going all right, isn't it?" And he would tell her how excellently the play was shaping, how funny old Joe Chatterton was going to be, how hard the chorus was working, what pretty scenery Wellands' was making for them, and what charming dresses Pocock's had designed.

There was one thing about which Linda never seemed able to satisfy herself; this was the effect of Psyche's intrusion. Always she was blaming herself as the cause of this misfortune. Michael persisted in reassuring her.

"Make your mind easy," he would say. "She can't do much damage. They've given her a little part of a few lines and a dance or two and a song or two, and she's quite happy. And really she's worth it for her face alone. I expect she can go quite high in musical comedy if she'll only take her work seriously. And she seems to be doing that: I mean she's always practising her steps, and Burke tells me that she does just what he tells her. She's sense enough to see that Burke knows a little more about it than she does. He says he can't tire her, however often he makes her do a bit of work. She always seems ready for more. It's a pity she can't sing a little louder; but that isn't really essential so long as she'll pronounce her words clearly and smile now and then."

Linda never returned to the question of Psyche's relations

with Orde. She had done all she could in that affair, and she knew that Michael could do nothing at all. She tried not to think about it. And as Michael made so little of her effect on the production, Linda learned to hope that Psyche was really a person of no account to Orde also. That Orde, when he admitted Psyche to his cast, had been amiable rather than wicked.

Michael fostered this belief by refraining from all mention of the daily Orde-Psyche lunch. He saw no use in worrying Linda. Whittaker gave her all the worry that was necessary.

CHAPTER XXX

I

YOU are not to suppose that Orde was a happy man in these days.

No one who (being fond of his money) undertakes to finance a musical play need expect to enjoy anything that remotely resembles happiness, until he shall be assured that the box-office is going to do satisfactory business.

Orde, then, to begin with, was anxious about seven thousand pounds. He could afford to lose them, but he very earnestly did not wish to do anything of the sort. They were designed to buy him consideration at the hands of artistic London, and if the play should be a failure he was going to be very little better off in this respect than if he had kept his money in the bank. So he was anxious, secondly, for his little ambitions.

In the third place he was perpetually being worried by somebody.

If it wasn't Cust with a costume or a poster or something else for him to approve, it was Burke with a demand for the reduction of some scene which the increase of La Giaconda's part had made it necessary to sacrifice ; or it was Bellamy Frodsham explaining that one of his exit lines was difficult and requesting an amendment ; or it was Plock wanting a few words to supply a hiatus caused by a cut in some ensemble ; or it was Hutton asking him for a penknife to sharpen his pencil with ; or it was someone else—one of the women, probably, with a wheedling voice and a winning smile, and a compliment and a suggestion for the improvement of her part.

He grew almost afraid to look about him at rehearsal lest he should catch somebody's eye and see that somebody advancing towards him framing his or her lips for a petition. He dreaded to leave the table for a moment lest he should be waylaid with a complaint.

Only Hoffman kept away from him, and this, in itself, was enough to make Orde irritable. If only for the sake of appearances, he thought, Hoffman might sometimes speak to him. Orde was acutely conscious of the figure he cut in the eyes of his company, with his collaborator ignoring his very existence whenever they happened to be in the same room. He wished Hoffman would either clear out altogether or be civil ; one or the other, he didn't care which.

He was beginning to suspect, moreover, that he had made a fool of himself over Psyche. He had knocked his book to pieces to make a part for her, and he was not a ha'porth the better for it. She was nearly always as sweet as sugar to him ; she always seemed delighted to go out to lunch with him ; she had called her little dog after him, and she accepted all the flowers he offered her. She also called him by his Christian name, and let him look into her eyes, and press her hand under their table in the corner of the Savoy grill-room ; and once, while they were driving to lunch in a cab (the day was wet), she had laughed and slapped him when he had tried to kiss her, and had let him do it. But she had never again entered a cab with him.

All this was no good to Orde. United with the other annoyances it made him very irritable indeed.

He was aware that he and Psyche were narrowly observed. The company, he suspected, jested at his expense, understood that he was not as happy as he would have them believe. He could imagine them expressing their unwilling admiration of Psyche to one another ; Psyche, the girl who led the governor about by the nose—and always at arm's length.

He began to avoid addressing her during rehearsal ; once, while she was doing her first scene (the scene with Old Joe) under Burke's direction, poor stupid Orde got up and went out of the room. He had some idea of showing the

company that he was not particularly interested in Miss Van Loo.

At lunch she was tearful about his desertion of her, accused him of losing interest in her. He protested his undying love, and she consented to be appeased, but only on his promise that he would never do such a thing again. She also got the promise of another song out of him.

Yet, though it was raining again that day, she insisted on walking back to The Bath Theatre on the pretext that she wanted fresh air.

Soon Orde couldn't make up his mind whether he most hated her or desired her. It is quite certain that he often wished he had never seen her, and resolved to let her pay for her own lunches in future. Yet always there intervened next day that pride, obstinacy, or whatever you please to call it, which drives many a better man than Orde on and on, against his common sense and his true inclination, to the accomplishment of that to which he has set his hand. Or perhaps Psyche would bestow upon him a glance in which he thought he read a promise ; and his resolutions flitted from him, and soon afterwards he found himself walking beside her towards the Savoy.

There were times when he seriously considered the step of threatening to cut out the part of *La Giacinda* altogether. But he could not face it. And even if he could bring himself to threaten, he knew that the execution of the threat was impossible. Apart from the enormous trouble which any attempt to restore the book to its original condition, at this late period, would involve, what would the company think—and say ? And Hoffman . . . ? No, whatever came of it, *La Giacinda* must stay in.

But he wouldn't write another word for her.

No, he wouldn't.

Yet Psyche had only to look at him in a certain way and all she wanted was hers.

By the beginning of the fifth week of rehearsals she had secured for herself a capital little part, all complete, with songs, dances, and scenes. In return for this she had permitted Orde to pay her bill for nearly thirty lunches. Yet Orde was not content. There was really no pleasing the fellow. Psyche had, at any rate, declined all the dinners

to which he had invited her, and all the Sunday expeditions to Marlow and Maidenhead which he had proposed. He might have been much more seriously out of pocket than was the case.

II

But if Orde was not happy, Psyche was.

That she was going to take London by storm she had not the slightest doubt. La Giaconda was not, of course, a part in which her true capabilities could make themselves apparent, but for a beginning it would do pretty well. Next to Claudina it was, by this time, the best woman's part in the show. Rosella she no longer envied at all, and Gilda did not compete. La Giaconda could afford Gilda all that remained to her.

Gracie Cording (her rival brunette) had gone out, and the new Claudina—this Lovell woman—was not only pretty long in the tooth, but fair and fluffy—the very girl La Giaconda needed. So was Rosella fair, if it came to that. La Giaconda would be the only dark-haired girl among the principals.

Now that the genuine Italian tarantella dancers had been suppressed there was nothing to distract the audience's admiration from La Giaconda's dancing, and the songs Orde had made for her were dear little songs, just the sort of little songs she felt she could make good with. The "owl" song she particularly liked. The business Burke had given her for it seemed to her wonderfully new and comical.

As for her lines, they were good enough to go on with. Old Joe predicted a great success for their scene, and had assured her that, once the play had started running, they would be able to build it up to any extent and probably work in another about ten o'clock somewhere. As for her

dresses (and she had three of them), they were all sure to be very pretty and becoming, and she felt confident that she had given Burke and Orde more trouble over them than had, over theirs, any other three women in the company put together.

Her mastery of Orde was another source of happiness to Psyche. For the first time in her life she had a man to play with, and she found it a most amusing toy. Here was a game entirely to her taste, the game of making Orde do things. Every day she discovered a new method of dealing with him. On Monday she would talk nonsense, on Tuesday she would be silent, on Wednesday sweet, on Thursday cross, on Friday she would wheedle, on Saturday she would pretend to be jealous. On Sunday she let him wonder where she was. And always, whatever she did, the result was the same : he did as she wanted him to do. It was most interesting to Psyche—most interesting.

She never wearied, for instance, of the effect she could produce on him by looking steadily into his eyes ; and she had tones in her voice, she discovered, that could make him change colour. It was most satisfactory.

Her only regret was that she did not like him very much. He bored her. Lunching with him regularly as she did, she would have been better pleased if his conversation had been more entertaining. And after a time she began to find him too easy. She began to feel that she had learned from him all that she was likely to learn of this new pastime. She began to be glad that the production would soon be accomplished, to long for the time when it would not be necessary to be troubled with Orde any longer.

But she had even more than the growth of her part and her manipulation of Orde to make her happy, the fortunate girl. Every time she saw Hoffman a little thrill of triumph passed through her. Not once had he spoken to her since she had entered the production ; not once had she made an attempt to speak to him. They treated one another as being non-existent. Only by his setting of *La Giaconda*'s lines in the duet with Giovanni had Hoffman ever shown that he was aware that Psyche Van Loo was to play that part. But that was quite enough acknowledgment of her for Psyche. She did not covet his frowns and his

rudenesses ; she preferred him to ignore her. It made her victory a better thing. As she expressed it to herself, "The man had pith in him." She liked to beat people with pith in them.

Orde, for instance, had no pith in him ; none whatever. Orde was just dead easy.

Often she was tempted to ask Hoffman what Linda was doing, now that she had got the sack from Pontefract Terrace. But she never did. She did not mean to risk her position by addressing the man.

III

So Psyche was very happy and thoroughly satisfied with herself, and so she remained until within a week of the dress rehearsal. Then it happened that, as she was sitting near the door of the property room, waiting for one of those interminable scenes in which she did not take part to finish, she overheard two of the lady choristers talking together not far away. They were speaking of Burke, who, in his shirt sleeves, and with the perspiration streaming upon his brow, laboured to instruct the eight boy-pirates in a burlesque drill which he had invented for them.

"Poor old Burkie!" one of these ladies was saying, "he does do his best, don't he? He'd be the fortune of a candle factory at this moment, Maudie; wouldn't he, de-ar?"

"Ah!" said Maudie gloomily, "he don't spare himself. And it isn't as if he could *do* anythink, love, is it? We're in for the bird, sure;" and she sighed heavily.

"Well," said the other, who appeared to be an optimist, "you never know your luck. The burial party hasn't started yet I never despair, come what may, and I *shan't*

buy my cage till it's needed—see? Wot I say is, Mr. Hoffman's music's all *right*."

"Yes," said Maudie, "and that's what makes me so wild. It's bad enough for us poor devils, but what about him? We can starve through till panto, somehow, but it's going to break Mr. Hoffman's heart. I don't believe they'll play a second night. They won't have time to clear the stage of the things that'll be thrown. Oh, it's going to be a record in the way of frosts! Anyway, the carpenter's got a half-crown to a shilling about it with the sergeant, and the carpenter'll win his money, mark my words, Lily."

"The governor's off his onion," said Lily, desponding at this news, "that's what's the matter with him. Blast him!"

"Careful, lovey," said Maudie, glancing at Psyche, and nudging her friend.

Lily raised her voice a trifle. "Blast *all* amateurs, say I!" she observed, and looked to see how Miss Van Loo was standing it.

Miss Van Loo wasn't listening to them any longer. She had suddenly been confronted with the suggestion that "The Conspiracy at Capri" was going to be a failure—a failure of more than ordinary conspicuousness. Such a thought had never occurred to her.

Psyche had hitherto assumed that the play was to be a vast success. I suppose this was largely owing to the fact that she had a good little part and that her dresses pleased her. Psyche was young to the stage, but she was already as sure as any veteran that the "good of the piece" depended on the extent to which she should be permitted to act in it. And as she had obtained very much more of a part than she had ever hoped for, she naturally supposed that the play was in for a very long run. It could not be otherwise.

And now here were these choristers croaking in their corner, predicting that as a frost "The Conspiracy" was going to be the limit, assuring each other that "the bird" was to be their portion.

Psyche sat for a long time plunged in thought, while Burke went on shaping the evolutions of his boy-brigands,

and Lily went about telling her friends how she had given Van Loo a jag. Psyche had suddenly lost confidence in the whole production—in Orde, in Burke, in Cust, in Old Joe, in herself. As the first breath of scepticism suffices, now and then, to tumble about the ears of the young Christian the whole edifice of a life's accepted belief, so it was now with Psyche. She had never considered the possibility of failure for the play, and now she could not imagine it succeeding. Burke—the clever Burke, so helpful, so ingenious in providing business, so competent—had become in her eyes simply a fat, perspiring man drilling a lot of stupid little boys. Old Joe was now nothing but a back-number comic, engaged because the public was tired of him and he could be got cheap ; she could no longer think of Old Joe as an irresistibly waggish person, for ever fertile in wheezes, and confident in the success of their scene.

And Orde—well, at this moment she hated Orde with her whole soul. How had she ever come to think that Orde was any use ? A mere amateur like that ! She was furious to think that she should have to make her London début in the rotten play of an Orde. She thought of the lines he had given her, and she perceived that they were stupid and pointless. Those of her first scene were designed solely to give Old Joe a chance to score. They were no use to her. And the others were no better. ~~Pointless~~ ! That was what they were. And her songs ! That “owl” thing, for instance . . .

Psyche got up and walked about in the gloom at the back of the stage ; and as she walked she shot angry glances at Orde where he sat under the T light on the little platform which had been built in the orchestra.

IV

That evening, as the rehearsal broke up, she waylaid Cust and told him that she wanted to speak to him. "Not here," she said, with a side-look at Orde. "Somewhere else."

Cust wondered; but because this girl had given him fifty pounds, and he always hoped for more from the same source, he said, "Sure, Miss Van Loo—wherever you please."

"I'll stop my cab," she said, "at Charing Cross, and I'll wait for you in the first-class waiting-room."

Cust said that would do excellently.

Psyche let Orde put her into a cab, bade him good-bye with a sweet smile and rolled away.

Orde said, "Now, Cust, what about that programme proof?"

"My boy," said Cust earnestly, "I'm just going round to Huntingdon's to raise small hell about it. I'm going to frighten Messrs. Huntingdon right out of their boots. You shall have that proof in the morning, and either Huntingdon's or somebody else will have printed it."

You would never have supposed that the proof was in his pocket!

Thus Cust got rid of Orde and fled in a cab to Charing Cross. He was there one minute after Psyche. He found her choosing a magazine at the bookstall.

"Well," he said, "and what can we do for *you*, Miss Van Loo?"

She led him to a place where there were no people.

"You can tell me, Mr. Cust, whether this play's going to succeed or not," she said.

Cust spread his hands, as he so often did. "My dear young lady," he cried, "if I could do that, do you think I'd be managing 'The Conspiracy'? No, I'd be sitting in a Savoy suite, drinking champagne and smoking ten

bob cigars all day, and pocketing the managers' money. Why, a man who can tell whether a play's going to succeed or not doesn't exist. Nobody can do more than guess and hope—and pray, if he feels like it."

"Well," she said, "what do you guess, for example?"

He looked at her narrowly. "Why do you ask?" he said.

"Because," she said, "if 'The Conspiracy's' going to fall down I mean to stand from under as quick as I can. I want another engagement to follow on with at once. Mr. Orde's not the only person in management in London. What about Foscari?"

He stroked his chin. "Foscari?" he said. "Oh! Ah! Well, of course, there's Foscari. Yes, Foscari's always on the look-out for talent. That's why he's Foscari, I expect."

"Yes," she said. "Well, I want him to be on the look out for me. Can you work it?"

"It's a big order," he said. "It's not every day that one can get hold of Foscari. He's about as hard to interview as the king at Windsor."

Cust had wished to keep his hands on the little Van Loo. She was a pretty rotten sort of artist, but her face was worth money any day of the week. And she would learn. She was keen. He would have been very glad to manage the little Van Loo.

"Don't you worry about Foscari just yet," he said. "Wait a year or so, till you've had a little more experience. Wait till you're a bit better known, Miss Van Loo. You'll get better terms from him then."

"Terms be hanged!" said Psyche. "I want to act in London. I don't want to go round the provinces getting experience. I'd rather be a show girl at The Broadway than play lead on tour. You get me in at The Broadway, and I'll look after the rest. I want Foscari to be in front on Tuesday. Get him there."

"And how?" said Cust.

"That's your affair, Mr. Cust. But you once had fifty pounds from me."

"Did I?" said the agent. "So I did; so I did." He laughed, for Psyche's methods pleased this simple-hearted

man. "And I should like another fifty," he said. "I confess that I should very much like another."

"Very well, then," said Psyche.

"It's a harder job," he said insinuatingly.

"Yes," she said, setting her mouth; "but you owe me something on that other deal. It was just handed to you that time."

He saw that she was not to be moved.

"Very good," he said, "I'll do what I can. I'll do what I can, Miss Van Loo." And on this they separated. It was unnecessary for Cust to answer Psyche's question as to the probable success of "The Conspiracy at Capri." That didn't matter now."

v

Three days later Psyche said carelessly as she came out of the Savoy with Orde, "Well, good-bye for the present. Tell Mr. Burke he's got to excuse me this afternoon."

"Where are you going?" asked Orde suspiciously.

"If you must know," she said, "to my dentist. You don't want me to play on Tuesday night with a face like a football, do you?"

"I'll drive you there," said Orde.

"Oh no, you won't, Mister Man," she said definitely. "You'll toddle back to rehearsal like a good boy. Tell him," and she stepped into a cab, "27, Wimpole Street, will you?"

Orde did as he was told; when she spoke to him in that particular voice he always submitted. Then he went back to tell Burke that he had given Miss Van Loo leave from rehearsal so that she might keep an appointment with her dentist.

When she had been in the cab a few seconds, Psyche blew through the speaking-tube and told the driver to go to The Broadway Theatre.

At the theatre she left the cab and inquired at the box-office for Mr. Foscari. She received some directions, and was presently mounting a long flight of stone steps which carried her to the very top of the building. She climbed quickly, with a confident step. How easy everything was in this business, she thought. One had only to open one's mouth and the good things fell in of themselves—at least, if one was handsome. It was a great convenience to be handsome.

Psyche was quite aware that it was her face which had procured her her coming interview with Foscari. Cust had taken a photograph of her with him when he arranged this matter, and she knew that the photograph had done the trick. Nothing that Cust could have said about her accomplishments could have had much weight with Foscari ; those were things on which a man like Foscari would take nobody's opinion but his own. The photograph, however, had not depended for its effect on what Cust might say about it ; it had spoken for itself. Foscari had surrendered to it. And so she was now on her way to see Foscari, and Foscari—of this she was entirely confident—was going to offer to give her an engagement so soon as "*The Conspiracy*" should come to an end.

That was all she wanted at present—an engagement at The Broadway, however small. Once let her get in there, and she flattered herself she knew how to improve her position. This past month had taught her something. She didn't suppose Foscari would turn out as easy a proposition as poor old Orde—with the pick of the world to choose from he couldn't,—but that would make it all the more interesting. Oh, she thought she would be able to manage Foscari all right, all right !

There were two girls in the office, working typewriters busily, and there was nobody else. Psyche was impressed by the quiet and emptiness of the place ; it was very different from Cust's office. The herd was evidently interviewed elsewhere. This reflection increased her confidence ; it made her feel very important.

She gave her card to one of the girls, who instantly announced her name through a telephone, and then, opening a door, invited her to walk through it.

Psyche went into the next room and found herself in the presence of a courteous, careworn gentleman with a bald head, who, in a soft voice, asked her to be seated.

"Are you Mr. Foscari?" asked Psyche.

He smiled pleasantly. "Well, no," he said, "I am only his representative, Mr. Durham. Mr. Foscari asked me to see you, Miss Van Loo, because he's at the moment very busy."

Instinct told Psyche that she must be agreeable to Mr. Foscari's representative if she meant to see Mr. Foscari.

"I'm glad," she said, "because I'm afraid of Mr. Foscari, but I'm not afraid of you at all. You look kind, Mr. Durham."

He smiled again. It was his custom when he interviewed young women. It meant nothing, but Psyche felt that she was making a good impression.

"Mr. Cust tells me you want to come in here at The Broadway," he said.

"Yes," said Psyche, "that is, when the piece I'm in at present finishes. You see, I want Mr. Foscari to see me on our opening night. Can that be arranged? You see—"

"May I ask you to lift your veil?" he said.

Now, Psyche had put on a veil with the intention of making an effect on Foscari by suddenly raising it. She perceived that the effect would have to be made upon Mr. Durham first. She did as she was told. Mr. Durham gazed earnestly at her for some moments without speaking. Then he said, "Thank you," and lifted a telephone which stood at his elbow. Into the mouthpiece he said, "Cust spoke the truth," and after listening to a reply he said, "This way, Miss Van Loo," and, rising, opened a door for her. Psyche had passed her entrance examination.

She went into the next room. Here she discovered in a big easy chair a fair, curly-headed, plump little man with a curly pointed beard. He was sumptuously dressed, and he was busy paring his nails with a small gold penknife. This seemed to be all that he had to do. "This," said

Mr. Durham, "is Miss Van Loo, Mr. Foscari." And the door closed upon him.

Foscari looked up quickly, fastened his gaze on her for a moment, and then he said :

" Will you please to stand more in the light—so ; " and he moved his thumb towards the window. His words were polite enough, but his manner was the manner of one who asks the waiter to bring him the matches. Psyche longed to stand up to him, but somehow she didn't feel able to do it. She went where she had been told to go. He examined her face carefully in silence for a while—she had not lowered her veil again—and his bright brown eyes disconcerted her extraordinarily. Her own fell, and she became aware that her heart was beating violently and that she was blushing. This angered her, and she blushed more redly than before.

She heard his knife shut with a click, and the small sound startled her like an explosion. She jumped, and he laughed pleasantly.

" You want a shop here, eh ? " he asked. His voice had changed. It was caressing now.

" If you please," said Psyche, rather faintly.

" No," he said softly ; " if *you* please, what ? "

At once triumph invaded her soul. This great Foscari—she had shot him sitting. It was going to be Orde over again. Oh, these men ; they were easy game ! She stole a glance at the manager and met his eye again ; again she failed to hold her own. She felt the need of breaking the silence, which suddenly oppressed her beyond bearing.

" Mr. Cust," she began hurriedly, " has told you about me, I expect. You must know, Mr. Foscari, that I'm only a beginner ; you see——"

" That's all right, my dear," he said affably. " Don't you worry. Mr. Cust has told me, yes. You cannot dance—eh ? Well, you shall learn. You cannot sing—no ? We can teach you that at The Broadway, all right. You cannot act for tof-fi—no ? It is of no importance. That, too, you shall learn. We teach everything here. Every-thing. That is perfectly all right. It is only a matter of your working hard. Can you do that ? "

" Oh yes," she cried, " I'm willing to work. Rather !

I'm awfully keen, Mr. Foscari. But I don't know anything. This is my very first show. So if you come to see me on Tuesday, I do hope you'll make allowances."

"Oh," he said, "I don't think it is necessary for me to come to see you on Tuesday. You see, I *have* seen you. You are a very beautiful girl, and that is enough for me. For the rest—oh! we will teach you all that when you come here. It's a deal, my love."

"Oh, thank you," she began again.

"You shall tell Mr. Cust," he said, "that I'm very much obliged to him. Your play is no good—eh? Well, you shall come in here presently. What you say? Look at *me*."

"Why," she said, "I can only say thank you." For the third time her eyes met his.

"Oh," he said lightly, "this is *business*. I do not want your thanks. They are no use to Foscari." He shrugged his shoulders and made a little grimace at her, but his eyes never left hers. "Thanks are cheap, Miss Van Loo. I shall buy a cartload of them with a pocketful of coppers in a walk along the dear old Strand. Thanks are no use whatever to Foscari."

Again Psyche's eyes fell. This was no Orde to be led about on a string.

"I don't know what you mean," she faltered.

"Well," he said, "you run away now and think some. Perhaps you will see by-and-by. If you come back here I shall know that you have comprehended—eh? Isn't it?"

Psyche's spirit asserted itself. "Well," she said boldly, "what *do* you mean exactly? I'd rather understand."

He considered her. "You think it over," he said.

It occurred to her to hope that perhaps he only wanted money from her. "Oh," she said, "I'm willing to pay for the opportunity, of course. I suppose your fee isn't very enormous, Mr. Foscari."

"Oh no," he said. "Not enormous at all. You can pay it all right."

"How much?" she asked desperately.

He waved his hand again. "Oh," he said, "we can talk of that later on, yes. Later on—when you come back.

After your play shall have finished—*then* we can talk business, isn't it? Mean-a-while you run away and think it over good. If you do not come back I shall be sorry, for I can make you very famous. But I think you will come back. Only remember, thanks are no use to Foscari."

He touched a bell on the desk that was near his chair, and a minute later Psyche was descending the long stone staircase. She went down it very slowly. She understood.

"Anyhow," she was thinking as she came out into the street, "he can't *make* me go back."

But as she passed the entrance of the theatre she paused to look at the photographs, and her pause was a long one. At last she shrugged her shoulders, turned away, hailed a cab, and told the driver to take her to the Paganini Rooms. It was only when she arrived there that she remembered that they were rehearsing at The Bath Theatre.

CHAPTER XXXI

I

“ **W**ELL, old boy,” said Burke, “ good luck ! ”
“ Thanks, old boy,” said Michael. “ Same
to you.”

They shook hands in the middle of the darkened stage, and Michael, going out by the archway, passed through the populace of Capri where it waited, massed in the wings, for its entrance. From all sides he heard the girls and boys of the chorus wishing him good luck, and he smiled on them and thanked them and wished the same to them. The chorus, in their fine new dresses, standing among the pretty new scenery, was in an optimistic frame of mind. It had forgotten all its gloom of the past month. It was much too greatly excited to think failure possible. But Michael had no belief that any good luck was coming. At the top of the wooden stairs down which he had to go in order to reach the orchestra, he met little Hutton, hurrying to the prompt corner. “ Good luck, Mr. Hoffman,” said Hutton, and Michael smiled again and wished the same to him. Then he went down the stairs, passed below the stage and came out into the orchestra. The drum wished him good luck, so did the first fiddle as he climbed into the conductor’s seat.

Somewhere behind him a little clapping broke out. Michael, frowning, supposed that that ass, Arthur Craddock, must be responsible for this, for he doubted if there was another soul in front who knew the composer of “ The Conspiracy ” by sight. The clapping grew for a second or two and then died quickly away ; there had not been enough of it to make the whole house applaud a man of

whom it knew nothing. Time enough, the house felt, to applaud this Hoffman (if this was indeed Hoffman, of which the house was not at all sure) when he had shown what he could do. The house looked at him, however, through its opera glasses, examining his back. Then it settled itself in its seats, glad that the play was going to begin at last.

Michael made no movement to acknowledge the perfunctory applause. He didn't want to look at the house at all. He had managed to reach his seat without looking at it, and now he meant to forget all about it—if he could. His business was to conduct his play, not listen for laughs and clapping. He ran his eye carefully and seriously over his orchestra and assured himself that it was ready for him. A tiny red ball glowed for a second in the lamp which lit the score, and he knew that Burke was ready. He pressed a button, and the lights in the house began to go out. He raised his stick and his left hand, and the volume of the din that was going on behind him fell one-half. Then he brought his hands down smartly.

The overture began with Lorenzo's military song. Then came that waltz which, at the beginning of things, had done so much to bring Orde into the collaboration. This was followed by a love ballad, which Adolpho was subsequently to sing in the second act, and for a conclusion there was the tarantella which Orde had cut out of the play.

The success of Michael's music was instantaneous. The house sat up, wagged its heads and its hands, and tapped with its toes on the floor. It smiled at itself and told itself that this was pretty lively stuff for a beginner. When the tarantella ended with a crash, clapping followed quite spontaneously and was continued for nearly half a minute.

Michael never moved, but he was strongly tempted to turn round and kiss his hands to the house. At the moment he adored it. All his forebodings were gone. The piece was going to be a success. His music was going to do the trick. His music! He wondered what Orde was thinking about the tarantella now. He looked at his bandsmen and saw that they were nearly all smiling. He knew that he was smiling too.

He pulled himself together, tapped his desk, and began the dawn music. At the tenth bar the curtain rose. He

could see Burke's face in the prompt corner, round, red, and smiling, above that tiny man Hutton. Burke's hand rose into view and was waved at him encouragingly.

Wellands had made a very good job of their scenery, and the square of Capri town under the mysterious light of the blues got its effect at once. Again the house began to applaud, but, because the orchestra was playing, many people cried "Hush!" and the dawn effect was allowed to proceed to its proper accompaniment. Presently, as the light grew, two brigand-boys were to be seen at their doubtful work, affixing revolutionary manifestoes to the shutters of the houses and one to the cloak collar of Mr. Lushington, feigning sleep upon the steps of the church. In the wings they were chirruping on bird-whistles.

With the full coming of the day and the end of the dawn-music the pleasure of the house once more expressed itself in applause—almost enthusiastic. This Mr. Clarence Farquharson (under which name Orde figured as manager on the bills and programme) had, at any rate, provided a very pretty set for his first act. Perhaps, after all, this piece was going to be amusing.

Then came on to the stage Mr. Hearn in the guise of an Italian policeman of one hundred and fifty years ago.

There was no more applause for a long while. The house felt that it had done enough for the unknown Hoffman and the unknown Farquharson. Now let the unknown Orde show what he could do. The house settled down again to judge the piece calmly and critically. It felt that it had been taken a little by surprise and was rather ashamed of itself for yielding its approval so quickly. It remembered that it was a first-night audience. Its business was to decide the success or failure of this piece. Things looked as if these two new boys might have something in them, but it was too early to say yet. There was lots of time for them to fall down before eleven o'clock, and the overture would naturally contain the winners of the piece. None of these people wished Michael's play to succeed, for humanity (being in the mass unsuccessful) is a jealous beast, grudging glory to those units who ask for it, and the newcomer has always to overcome this feeling of hostility and jealousy.

So, until Old Joe came on there was hardly any applause. The policemen's duet, the entrance of the Capri populace alarmed by the revolutionary manifestoes, Lorenzo's arrival with the news of the prince's coming visit to the island, the discussion of the situation between Lorenzo, the chorus, and the two policemen, and the exit of the chorus,—all this passed without a sign of approval from the house, and the musical opening of the play came to an end almost in silence. To be sure, the scene which followed between Adolpho and Lorenzo, in which they told one another of their love for Claudina and Rosella, got a few half-hearted laughs ; but Adolpho's love ditty, "To Capri, to Capri I floated across the bay," was poorly received. Already the house was beginning to be impatient, when Giovanni came on with Gilda. Instantly there was a round of applause. Dear Old Joe ! He was a bit of a back number, but he had been a favourite a very long time. It was good to see him again, and to remember his performance in this and that and the other. Perhaps, now he was on, things would begin to pick up a bit with this rather deadly little piece. Already the house had forgotten the pleasure it had received from the overture ; already it was accustomed to the beauty of the stage picture ; already it was in a mood to condemn the whole play out of hand.

Old Joe proceeded to pick the piece up, and exerted himself magnificently. Soon he had the house laughing and telling itself that it was wonderful how Old Joe managed to do it at his age, that there was, after all, nobody just like Old Joe. The trio and dance of Old Joe, Bellamy Frodsham, and Miss Jane Wheelan, which took these three artists off, was encored. Michael could hardly believe that he was actually setting the orchestra to work for the repetition of the third verse. An encore already ! He forgot that "To Capri" had not got a hand. That circumstance had plunged him into despair at the time ; but it was of no consequence now. "To Capri" would have to come out to-morrow, or the next day, or as soon as a new song could be made to go in that place. But meanwhile the trio had been encored. An encore within a quarter of an hour of the curtain going up ! It was enormous !

He was so happy that the spectacle of Psyche advancing

from behind the church to meet Old Joe, who had returned to the stage, appeared to him almost agreeable. Since things were going so well, why should he grudge the girl her small triumph ? This little scene would soon be over, and then he, Michael, would have another chance at them. The boy-brigands would come on for their entrance number, Claudina would appear at her window to sing her first song with the boys, and there would follow the oath of allegiance taken by the lads to Claudina as the princess whom they were to impose upon Capri, with all that funny business which he and Burke had thought up. Yes, once La Giaconda's silly little scene with Old Joe was over, his music would have a long turn at them. He leaned back in his seat to watch, with quite friendly eyes, Old Joe and Psyche do their scene, and at last give him his music-cue.

He could hear the men talking in the stalls just behind him, and, looking round for the first time, he was aware of a movement of interest in the house. From all sides opera-glasses were being levelled at the stage, and people were turning in their seats and speaking to each other. La Giaconda had created an impression. He was glad. Since the girl was in the piece she might as well do it a bit of good while she was about it.

Old Joe, in the best of tempers, because he had just been encored, waddled across to Psyche and began their scene.

He said "Ah, hah ! Here is my little friend La Giaconda." This line had been put into his part at Psyche's command, so that the audience should know at once who she was when she should come on to the stage.

Psyche said her first line, and there was a laugh in the house. Her voice was so tiny. The laugh unnerved Psyche, and she forgot her second line altogether. Old Joe didn't seem to care in the least. He was there to be funny, and funny he was accordingly. He improvised a number of drolleries which, to his annoyance, obtained very little laughter. The truth is, the house was too much interested in La Giaconda to listen very much to what Old Joe was saying.

Psyche stood as dumb as a fish. She was paralysed because she had forgotten every word of her part except

the second line, which had come to her now. And it was too late to speak it. Old Joe hadn't waited for it. He had gone on quite happily with words which he had never said before during their rehearsals of this scene. Of course Old Joe knew that the girl had dried up ; but this wasn't the first time he had had to carry on a scene by his own unaided efforts. He was entirely equal to the emergency. If the house had been laughing he would have been quite pleased. But the house wasn't laughing. It was looking at La Giaconda and wondering what on earth she was supposed to be doing. Obviously the comedian was gagging while this girl pulled herself together. But it was about time she managed to do it ! Who—and the house looked at its programme—who the deuce was this Psyche Van Loo who was playing La Giaconda ? She was thundering pretty and all that, but oughtn't she to begin to *do* something ? It was really rather scandalous. Did this management think that it was enough to find pretty girls and put them on the stage to be looked at ? The house began to be annoyed with Psyche.

Soon there came a little laughter, unpleasant laughter. Old Joe recognised its character at once. He knew that he was doing no good to himself or little Van Loo or the piece by keeping on gassing away in the hope that the girl would recover herself. The scene was a frost. "Cut it out," he thought, and, extremely angry with Psyche, he took her by the arm and, not without some winks at the house, proposed that they should go for a stroll together in the woods. Then he led her off through the archway, told her that it would be all right, and went, cursing, to his dressing-room.

The house gave vent to a few hisses. It didn't approve of that sort of thing at all. It was very bad—very bad indeed. It asked itself again who the deuce this Psyche Van Loo might be, anyway. It thought it comprehended the situation, and it smiled cynically.

And here was a stage-wait going on. Worse and worse ! This was just the sort of thing one might expect from these unknown managements. Who the devil was this Mr. Clarence Farquharson, who proposed to run a season in the West End with this kind of material ? And how much

longer was this stage-wait going to continue? the house wondered. A few more hisses were heard. Somebody called "Speak louder, please," in the self-important voice of the person in the pit who wishes it to be understood that it is quite necessary that he shall hear every word of the dialogue—and there was a laugh.

Michael at last realised that the stage was empty, and that the boy-brigands were waiting in their entrances for their music to begin. The unlucky scene between Old Joe and Psyche had come to its sudden close and found him unprepared. With his first realisation that Psyche had broken down and was going to ruin this scene which had cost his play so dear, poor Michael had ceased suddenly to be the director of an orchestra. The monstrous nature of the offence blinded him to everything else. He could only think and think, "Oh! the little beast! Oh! the little beast! She can't even do it when she gets the chance. Oh! the little beast! She can't even say her words. Cuts in and knocks my play to hell, and then can't even say her words. Oh! the little beast!" He was white with anger at Psyche. His eyes remained fastened upon the arch through which she had vanished.

He became aware of a touch on his elbow and, looking down, he met his first fiddle's eyes. "Brigands' entrance," said the first fiddle softly.

Michael heard hissing high up in the gallery. Someone cried, "Next, please," and another short, nasty laugh went through the house.

Michael picked up his baton and moved it without meaning, and the orchestra, good men, began to play (though nervously) the opening bars of the brigands' entrance. At the third note Michael was himself again. He forced himself to forget Psyche and concentrate on his music, the music which was to win through, in spite of everything. The orchestra became aware that their conductor was himself again, and felt much happier.

Boys came out through various entrances, advanced, finger on lip, to the centre of the stage, did several things which Burke had taught them, and sang a chorus. Gisco, their chief, swaggered on, squinting and wriggling as young Charlie Truefitt thought only he could squint and wriggle.

Presently Claudina appeared at her window. In a word, the play continued.

But the house was not pleased.

Things had taken a wrong turn for "The Conspiracy at Capri." The excellent impression which Michael's overture and Wellands' stage picture had produced had vanished, and its place had been taken by a conviction that the piece was going to be just one other wild-cat musical comedy gamble, one of those unsubstantial ventures, two or three of which every year offer themselves as victims of London's contemptuous neglect. It seemed to be the same old story. A syndicate with a few thousands and a cheap play and a lot of hope ; a cast, got together anyhow, to unknown cheap people, and one good but out-of-date comedian ; a theatre that had never had a run ; and a pretty fool, with somebody to put in some money for her and insist that she shall get a show. The house was tired of this sort of thing : it had had too much of it. It was time something was done to show these people that the public wasn't taking any more of it.

And the piece had looked as if it was going to be a likely little piece. There was really something to be said for the music. If they'd only got some artists with voices to sing it there might have been something doing. But this Bellamy Frodsham, now—this Mildred Lovell, now—what kind of people were these ? Number Two company people, one would say. No, Mr. Clarence Farquharson mustn't really suppose that he was going to make his fortune in the West End with a lot like this, and a few worm-eaten pantomime gags from poor Old Joe Chatterton and this Charlie Truefitt—whoever *he* might be.

Well, well, it was a bit soon to turn one's thumb down yet. This was only the first act, and it was reasonable to suppose that towards ten o'clock things would wake up a bit. The house looked at its watch and noted that it wasn't nine yet. And it yawned.

And it yawned.

The chorus was again on the stage singing the music that led up to the entrance of the Prince of Capri. The house was happier now. So long as the chorus was on, it felt that it had something worth listening to. This was a

pretty good chorus. It worked hard and it sang hard. The house understood that hard work lay behind the performances of the chorus. It was something that one could conscientiously applaud. It relieved one from the necessity of listening to the very poor lines of this very dull-witted person, Orde. The house conceived an admiration for the chorus and forgot that it had been rather bored by the long concerted opening of the play, and it took the opportunity of the prince's entrance to make something like a demonstration of approval. Here, at any rate, was somebody it knew and liked—Robert Nisbet, a sound actor, sir! The house rather wondered what Robert Nisbet was doing in his present company, and hoped that this didn't mean that the poor old chap had fallen on hard times. It remembered that it hadn't heard anything about him for a year or two. Well, all the more reason to give him the glad hand now. Nisbet and the chorus between them succeeded in obtaining quite a lot of encouragement.

The prince sang his song, the chorus dispersed into the wings, and the prince and Giovanni continued the first act, while Michael sat back in his chair and tried to assure himself that all was not yet lost.

The prince and Giovanni having spoken certain lines which were supposed to be necessary to the plot, the chorus came back on to the stage in order to give Psyche a background for the dance which she was to execute in honour of the prince's arrival, the dance by which she was to obtain the post of lady-in-waiting, which event would enable her to produce Bertie from her big sable muff later on in the play.

Robert Nisbet gave Michael his music cue, Michael set his orchestra going, and La Giaconda bounded upon the stage.

Psyche had better luck this time. Dancing was second nature to the girl, and she had practised her steps until she could have done them asleep. Her first attempt, moreover, to capture the great heart of London had given her a shock which, instead of taking the stiffening out of her, had only braced her determination to succeed. As she would have said, "She had set her little teeth and meant getting there." And to some extent she did get there. The house was not deceived by her dancing, and it turned

up its nose at her technique ; but it permitted itself to be pleased with her beauty. It directed its opera-glasses upon her all the time she was on the stage, and when she had done dancing it gave her a round of applause—for her face. But it did not ask her to repeat her performance, though she was firmly convinced that it had done so, and was furious with Michael for not taking the encore.

The company was delighted with him

When Robert Nisbet, in accordance with his instructions, affected rapture and offered her the job of lady-in-waiting and dancer royal to the court, the house laughed and told itself that the prince was easily pleased.

The play went on to the first fall of the curtain. There was a little clapping, as there was bound to be, and up in the gallery there was a little hissing. Then the house went out to the bars to pull "The Conspiracy at Capri" to pieces. This would never do, it said. Not at any price, it wouldn't. Several critics went away, after one whiskey and soda, to empty the urns of their scorn upon the new piece at The Bath.

II

The gallery was finding nothing good to say about "The Conspiracy at Capri." Unlike the stalls and dress-circle, it had paid to come in, and it was angry. The blasé stalls and circle, sitting free, might yawn or mock or wonder why they had come, but they had no reason to feel that they had been robbed. The gallery, however, had spent its luxury-money for the week on this play, and it did not think that it was getting anything like proper value. Besides, it took itself seriously as the arbiter of the fate of plays, and it was furious that such stuff should be offered for its consideration. It felt insulted.

"If things don't buck up a bit next ack," said a stout lady from Battersea to a thin lady from Bloomsbury, "there'll be trouble, mark me, Emma. What I say is, a management what 'as the neck to put on a show as rotten as what this one is, is just arsking for it. Why, the actors don't know their parts, and there ain't a laugh nowhere *in* the thing."

"Chatterton made me smile once," said the lady from Bloomsbury, lengthening her face dismally.

"Oh, Chatterton's not so bad, of course—"

"I mean," said the lady from Bloomsbury, "when he led Miss Fishy Van Loo of by the 'and. That was comic, that was. Unrehearsed too, but they should keep it in, *I* think. It made *me* smile, that did. And anythink that can make me smile *this* night is funny. *Wot* a show!"

"Well, there'll be trouble before they get through, take it from me, Emma. And they'll *deserve* it. It's a *shime*, that's wot it is. A shime—they might think they was in Manchester or somewheres. Not in London, certainly. How much do they suppose we'll *stand*? They think they can take our money and then 'and us a mixed up monkey 'ouse like this. *Did* you remark the steps of Miss Perskychy Van What's-her-name? A treat, I don't think. *She* ought to be leadin' the Russian bally in the Ivanouseafewdoroff Theatre at Doggibowwowski. She's a bit too good for London. Oh no! Not arf!"

"*She* ought to be burned alive," said the lady from Bloomsbury, as she began to bite the peel off an orange with her strong, long teeth.

Linda stood leaning on the wooden partition which ran round behind the gallery seats, and listened to her neighbours miserably. She had known for some time that the play did not please the house, for during the act which had just come to an end there had been several hostile demonstrations in the gallery; but it was only now that this hostility found articulate utterance. Linda felt stunned by the anger of these people.

She had come into this dreadful gallery prepared to assist at a triumph for Michael. She had listened to the people crowded round her as they asked one another who this Hoffman and this Orde might be, and where this Mr.

Clarence Farquharson might be supposed to have sprung from, and prophesied another failure ; and she had smiled to herself as she had thought of the awakening that was in store for these stupid fools. She could afford, at that time, to be amused by their ignorance. Very soon they would be singing a different song, when Michael's music should begin. She prepared herself to enjoy the change that would then come over them, and she stared at the curtain and tried to imagine him standing before it and bowing his acknowledgments of their enthusiastic applause. How she was going to clap and cheer !

It amused her to think that he should have supposed her capable of staying away. Solemnly at dinner that evening he had begged her not to go to the theatre, telling her that it would make him nervous to know that she was among the audience. And she had pretended to agree. How she wished now that she had obeyed his suggestion ! She understood now why he had not wanted her to come. He had had no faith in the play himself. He could not have had. Even she could see that "*The Conspiracy at Capri*" was a poor thing. Even she could not find much to blame in the gallery's attitude towards it. It was utterly unworthy of its music. Orde had proved a broken reed. Michael had been pretending all this time to be pleased with his collaborator. And she knew why. It had been for her sake that he had put a good face on things. He had not wanted her to worry, as he must have been worrying. Poor old Michael ! How little he understood women ! But it was kind and dear of him all the same.

And so—until he could get another chance—here was an end of all their fine projects for spending the great sums which royalties were to bring them. Well, well, she supposed they could do without foreign travel for a bit longer. Foreign travel wasn't everything. And another chance would come, for Michael's music was good. Even the gallery admitted that. The applause which had followed the overture had begun in the gallery, and that woman who was chewing the orange in the seat just below Linda had cried "*Good ole Hoffman !*" At that moment the play's success had seemed to Linda quite assured, and she had clapped furiously while the tears had started to her

eyes. And now everything had gone wrong. The play was going to be a failure.

"The music," the lady from Bloomsbury was saying—and Linda stooped forward to listen—"the music of this piece is all right, Clarry. This yere 'Offman can do a toon with the best of them. We shall 'ear of 'im again, I shouldn't wonder. But not any more Orde, thenks. We've 'ad some Orde, and don't want no more, old dear. Why, if Orde ever writes another play, I'd walk on my bare feet from 'ome to 'Ammersmith to 'iss it. He missed his line of business, Orde did, when he took up with musical comedy. I dare say he'd write advertisements for Back-ache Pills quite beautiful, though."

"Ah," said the lady from Battersea, "that reminds me——" And they proceeded to talk of other matters.

Presently the husband of the Battersea lady came back from the bar and took his place by his wife. Having drunk beer he was ready to ask the lady from Bloomsbury what she thought of the play, and did it. She told him in one short sentence.

"It gits the bird."

"It do," said the husband of the Battersea lady. "It do. Unless a miracle 'appens they git it. In the neck they git it. We was saying just now out there——" And he told them what had been said just now, out there.

He had not exhausted his report when Linda saw Michael climbing into his seat again. "That's 'Offman, that is," said the husband of the Battersea lady. "Wonder wot he thinks of it, poor bloke. His music's pretty, too. But the play's chronic. No music can hold up a play like wot this is. 'Ard luck on 'Offman, say I; but it's his own silly fault. He oughtn't to have ever had nothink to do with Orde. And now I expect he's sorry he did. What you say? Shall we give 'im a 'and? No? All right, we won't." And they didn't.

The curtain rose on Wellands' beautiful scene of the prince's garden with its admirable back-cloth of the Capri panorama from Tiberius's Villa, the back-cloth on which Michael had counted so confidently. The populace of Capri was discovered singing and dancing.

"Yes," said the lady from Bloomsbury, "there ain't

nothing the matter with the scenery. Wot makes *me* shudder is the thought of the *lines* they're going to speak." Her sentiments were probably those of the house, for there was no applause. The populace of Capri danced and sang, but not so well as it had hitherto done. Everybody on the stage knew that the house was against them, that the play was doomed. Not Michael with his stick, not Burke in the wings, could inspire those people with any kind of confidence. The choristers were thinking, "Another blooming frost. Another five weeks' rehearsals chucked away." They did their work listlessly. What was the good of bucking up? Let them get through and go home quick, so's to be up early, looking out for a new shop to fill up with till pantomime.

Linda kept her eyes on the stage, but she saw hardly anything of what was happening there. The chill silence that reigned in the theatre oppressed her faculties so that she could think of nothing but it. Why didn't they clap, laugh, hiss? Anything would be better than this contempt. Adolpho and Claudina had a scene; then a duet. The music was succeeded by absolute silence. Lorenzo came on, then Gisco and his boy-brigands. These droll little fellows extorted a few titters. Then came Giovanni and his wife Gilda to talk about a casket which contained proof of the identity of the rightful princess. They seemed to talk about this casket for ever. Rosella was the rightful princess, or she wasn't. Claudina was—or she wasn't. Either. It didn't matter. Adolpho was in love with Claudina. His father the prince wished him to marry the rightful princess, the daughter of his predecessor, and so unite the two dynasties and put an end to all talk of revolution. But Adolpho had sworn to marry Claudina and none other. Obviously, Claudina would turn out to be the rightful princess; just at present, however, Rosella had been put forward by her mother Gilda, who was supposed to know. Everything depended on some casket or other, which was lost. None of the adult characters knew where it was, but the house knew. Already Gisco, the boy-brigand chief, had told them and his followers that he had it. He had looted it from his father's room, it appeared—Giovanni's room. He was welcome to it.

Would Old Joe and Gilda never get done talking about this casket and let us have a little more music ? Old Joe was apparently cracking a great number of wheezes, but he wasn't being funny in the least. This thing was becoming intolerable.

Somebody far to one side of the gallery called, " Poor Old Joe ! " and the house guffawed. It felt that the comedian deserved its pity. What lines to give an actor of his standing ! No wonder he could do nothing with them.

Another wag, after the laughter had died away, shouted in an assumed woman's voice, " Ow, dear Mr. Chatterton, please do like 'er awigh too ; " and again the house laughed. Old Joe and Gilda played on gamely, fury at their hearts, wheezes on their lips. Somebody came on and carried the play forward by three minutes. Old Joe sang his comic song about the short way Tiberius had with people who annoyed him—described the tyrant's admirable plan of hurling them down the precipice which yawned below his villa. At the end of each verse the comedian paused, made a little movement with his hands sideways, and then sang his chorus :

" Out of the emperor's window,
Down to the deep blue bay,
It's a thousand foot dive,
And he's sure to arrive,
For there's nothing whatever to get in his way.
Once he has started his journey,
Wrapped up in his neat little sack
He's remarkably clevah,
But I don't think he'll evah
Come back—back—back ! "

The first verse was a general one, a sort of exposition of the theme. The second was concerned with a Liberal statesman ; the third with a leader of the Woman Suffrage Movement. Then Old Joe skipped off. He had three other verses up his sleeve to continue with, treating of other prominent persons, the abolition of whom was likely to be desired by the theatre-going public. But he received no encouragement. The house wreaked its irritation on its old favourite remorselessly. There was a little clapping ; but somebody shouted, " Have you got a verse about your blooming author, Joe ? " and the song was killed.

There were more concerted pieces, more scenes, more songs. Nobody cared what happened any longer. Psyche danced a second time. She sang her owl song and danced her owl dance. The house didn't hiss her. She was too pretty for that. It just endured her—though, to be sure, while she was singing, someone high up squeaked comically.

Nobody cared what happened any longer. The actors simply went through their parts ; the chorus simply sang what it had been given to sing. Michael simply moved his stick. The orchestra simply played its notes.

The house simply bided its time. It meant vengeance on these idiots who had lured it here to bore it.

Ultimately the curtain came down on Michael's great waltz, which ended the finale. It rose once and fell again to a little scattered applause that was more damning than silence. Many people in the stalls and circle put on their coats and went away.

“Wot a 'oly show !” said the lady from Bloomsbury.

III

Behind the curtain they were setting the scene for the third act, the great Blue Grotto scene. Burke stood by the footlights watching the movements of the stage hands. Though he knew that it was just so much waste of time to put his beautiful picture together, he gave as much care to the business as if the play looked like filling The Bath Theatre for a couple of years. Not a library had approached the management, and not one was going to do so. Not a publisher had made an inquiry for the music. “The Conspiracy” was a frost. He, Burke, was already branded in the eyes of his world as the producer of an abject failure, and it was very bad for him indeed. He

had needed a success extremely. A success would have just put him on his feet again. Now, as things had fallen out, he knew that whenever, in the future, he should be suggested as producer of a play, "The Conspiracy" would be remembered. People would say, "What, Burke? No thanks. Let's try for a *week's* run, at any rate." He had long foreseen this issue to his labours, but just as, during those last weeks of rehearsal, his conviction that the play would fail had not caused him to slacken, so, now that the failure was an accomplished fact, he kept on cheerfully doing his very best. Nothing escaped him. His eyes were everywhere at once, and the stage hands, though they knew how he felt, and though they would have been quite pleased to be careless, put their souls into their work and rattled the Blue Grotto together as smartly as if there had not been bets among them that they wouldn't be required to set the Capri Square scene that night. It was generally supposed that the notice would go up at eleven o'clock.

Cust came on to the stage from the door that led into the front part of the house. "My boy," he said to Burke. "it's the limit. They're going home. In cabs they're going." He gave a little nervous titter, for though he, personally, was well in pocket by Orde's venture, the magnitude of the disaster affected even him. "You'll ring up to empty stalls," he said.

"The gallery'll be there, though," said Burke grimly.

"It's a bad business," said Cust, as he put his eye to the peephole in the curtain. "They're going to be very nasty. Just look at 'em."

"I've something better to do," said the producer. "Damn them! I don't want to see them." His soul was bitter with hate of the British public, which had refused to accept his play, which was going presently to hand him the bird as it had never been handed to him before. "Mind where you're putting that rock-piece," he cried to one of the stage hands. The man was not in fault at all, but Burke wanted to get away from Cust. He walked over to the rock-piece and altered its position an inch or two.

He became aware that Michael was at his side.

"Hullo, Mikky," he said. "It's no go, I'm afraid. But you've made good all right, old man. They'll find some-

thing nice to say about the music to-morrow, I expect ; but the rest of those notices'll make poor reading for our Mr. Orde."

"I suppose," said Michael, "that he's going to play this act."

"He's got to try," said Burke. "We can't have a riot. But I doubt if the gallery'll let us play it through. This act is where *they* come in, you know. Anyhow, I mean to go on till I *have* to ring down. Poor old Mikky, I'm sorry ! "

"Oh," said Michael wearily, "don't be sorry for me. It's my own fault. I thought I was clever. Well, I wasn't. But Orde is a silly damned fool, isn't he ? "

"He is," said Burke. "I could go on all night saying what I think about Orde. But what's the use ? "

"Precisely," said Michael, "what's the use ? "

They were silent for a moment or two. Then Michael said, "Well, I'm going out for a breath."

"Do, old boy ; do," said the producer. He felt uncomfortable in Hoffman's neighbourhood, though he had always done his best for the poor boy. He knew that the musician must be blaming him a good deal ; he wouldn't be human if he wasn't.

"Is Orde anywhere about ? " Michael asked.

"Don't think so," said Burke. "He's up in his box still, I fancy. I should think he's got a pretty big bookful of notes for the improvement of the piece by this time," he added, with a grin. "Did you want to speak to him ? " he asked.

"No," said Michael ; "I want to avoid him. Is that Cust by the curtain ? " Burke nodded. "Well, I want to avoid him too," said Michael. "So long, old boy." He went out through the iron door that led to the stage exit and the dressing-rooms.

Burke, by continuing to superintend the setting of the Blue Grotto scene, soon managed to forget the look in poor old Mikky's eyes.

IV

They had played just fourteen minutes of the third act when Burke rang the curtain down for ever on "The Conspiracy at Capri" because it was useless to go on. Most of those people in the stalls and dress circle who had stayed for the third act had left the theatre, either ashamed to remain as spectators of the dismal exhibition, or alarmed lest the gallery should get altogether beyond control of itself. As for the gallery, it enjoyed its moment amazingly. It sang songs, it yelled, it whistled, it cat-called, it addressed insults to the artists, it shouted for the author, it threw orange-peel and paper darts on to the stage.

The charivari began with the opening bars of the introduction and was continued without interruption until, its victory demonstrated unmistakably by the fall of the curtain, the gallery dispersed in a most jovial frame of mind. The proof that it had won was greeted with prolonged cheers and the singing of "God Save the King."

The Blue Grotto scene could not soften the heart of the gallery, nor could the entrance of the populace of Capri in boats, singing Michael's pretty barcarolle. The gallery did not hear the barcarolle. It was singing a song of its own.

This was its vengeance upon the persons responsible for this play which it did not like. This was where it got some of its own back. This was where *it* came in.

All over the house throughout those fourteen minutes people were standing up, shouting, laughing, hissing, groaning, howling, singing, calling for order and silence and one cheer more, and telling each other that it was scandalous, or begging to be taken home. Two or three women without any proper cause fainted and were carried out.

The demonstration was quite good-natured. Now that its anger had found vent the gallery gave itself up to light-hearted rollicking. It amused itself with "The Conspiracy

at Capri." That it was torturing the actors never occurred to it. It didn't want to torture anybody or do anybody any harm whatever. All it wanted was to make it quite clear to the management that the play was not good enough by several miles—to give it, in short, "the bird."

Orde sat in the box with Cust, looking on. The financier-author was very pale. All his ambitions had come to the ground together, and he was furiously angry because of this ; he was also a good deal alarmed by the behaviour of the house. He sat behind the curtain of his box, with his hands plunged in his trousers pockets, and, round the edge of the curtain, stared at the house. What was happening on the stage he did not see ; nor did he look at Hoffman, down below him in the orchestra. He was thinking of his seven thousand pounds, chucked away for nothing ; he was thinking of the morrow's notices ; he was thinking what an ass he had made of himself. He was cursing Psyche Van Loo, who had caused him to make such a mess of this play. He was cursing Hoffman for ever having persuaded him to back the rotten show. He was even cursing poor Tertius Ray for ever introducing Hoffman to him. He was wondering what he must do. Obviously, the play couldn't go on much longer. The gallery meant stopping it. He tried to smile when he thought Cust was looking at him. He was cursing Cust too, the bungling fool ! The only person he was not cursing was himself. He thought that he had had very bad luck altogether.

What he wanted more than anything in the world was to see the curtain fall and be put out of this misery. But he could not bring himself to send Burke an order to ring down. He still clung to a sort of belief he had that things could not be so bad as they seemed. To ring down would be to destroy all hope.

Cust chewed his moustache and darted his eyes about—from the gallery to the stage, from the stage to Orde's face, from Orde to Hoffman, from Hoffman to the pit.

There came a tap on the door of the box, and Cust took in a note for Orde. It was from Burke, and it said : "No use going on. Better ring down. What do you say?"

Orde read it and handed it to Cust. "What do you

say?" he asked. He wanted Cust to take the responsibility. Cust took it without any hesitation. "*I* should ring down," he said. "The piece is a frost. There's no good pretending it isn't, Mr. Orde. *I* should ring down and put the notice up. We can't open to-morrow. It's just waste of money."

"Damn!" said Orde.

"Shall I go and tell Burke?" asked Cust.

"Yes."

"And about the notice?"

"Put it up. Put it up. I'm fed with this piece," said Orde presently. "I wish to God I'd never touched it."

"Certainly, Mr. Orde," said the agent as he opened the door.

"Cust," said Orde, "one minute. Tell the company, will you?—I mean those that haven't been guaranteed anything—that they'll get a fortnight's salary."

Cust looked very much surprised. "That's uncommonly good of you," he said. "It will be much appreciated."

"Poor devils," said the other. "It'd be a pity if no one made anything out of this piece."

"Ah," said Cust, and hurried away, smiling to himself.

It's hard to say why Orde did this. Perhaps he was grateful to the actors who had given him five weeks of hard work for nothing; perhaps he felt remorse because he had allowed Psyche to lead him by the nose to the ruin of the play; perhaps he only perceived that a generous action would do something to re-establish him in his own eyes; perhaps he wanted to stagger Cust; perhaps he feared the contempt of London which a management that treats its company shabbily is apt to reap; yes, perhaps he only wished to buy a few complimentary paragraphs in the newspapers. I prefer to think that he obeyed a decent impulse; for in a few respects he was quite a decent fellow, and I am glad to know that he could very well afford the three hundred pounds which his promise cost him.

At last, then, the curtain descended. At last the gallery brought its triumphant demonstrations to an end and flocked out of the theatre noisily to spread the news of the "Conspiracy's" downfall. The lights in the theatre were lowered, elderly women in aprons came out from their

lurking-places and began to spread cloths over the seats. Orde left his box and went behind.

The stage was dark and empty, and the Blue Grotto set was still in place. Inside the property-room, illuminated by a single lamp, stood Burke talking to Hoffman, who was by the door. As Orde approached them Michael shook hands with Burke and went away.

Orde was glad that his collaborator had not stayed.

"Well, Burke?" he said.

"Well, Mr. Orde?" said Burke.

"I'll say this," said Orde magnanimously, "it's not your fault."

"Thanks," said Burke. "I know that. But it don't matter whose fault it is, does it?"

"Has Cust told the company about their salaries?" asked Orde. He hoped that Burke would say something handsome.

"Yes," said Burke. "They're much obliged, of course. Excuse me, will you? I'm looking for my hat in here." He turned away into the room.

Orde felt that the producer had no wish to talk to him.

"Well, Burke," he said, "good-night, and thanks for all you've done."

"Not at all," said Burke, with his back to him.

Orde drifted away to the iron door. He felt very lonely. Was there no one to give him a smile and a pat on the back? He looked behind him at the Blue Grotto set and thought of what he was going to pay for it. And all those dresses, and the rest of the scenery! What the devil was he going to do with all that?

In the passage he glanced at the notice board and saw that the notice—*the* notice, was up. So it was done.

"The Conspiracy" had run for one night only. Not even for one night, damn it!

He went out through the stage door. There were very few people there—only two or three young men waiting for ladies of the chorus. They smoked cigarettes and stared at one another with hostile eyes. There was no talk going on. The failure of the piece seemed to have depressed even these youths.

Orde went out and walked in the court for several

minutes as far from the stage door as he could. Presently the artists began to come out. They went away alone or in couples, talking in hushed voices. Some of them took with them the young men who waited outside.

Old Joe came out, called good-night to the doorkeeper and passed down the court, talking rapidly and angrily to himself. Bellamy Frodsham appeared and disappeared. Other principals followed. Orde stayed in his dark corner, smoking and watching them. He knew that he ought to be with Cust upstairs in the office ; Cust would have a lot of business to talk over with him. Well, Cust might go to the devil !

Suddenly he moved out of the shadow. Psyche had come through the stage door. He overtook her halfway down the court.

"Psyche," he said as he came alongside of her, "Psyche!"

She turned her head a little. "Oh, is that you?" she said. "Good! You can get me a cab."

"Psyche," he said, "is that all you have to say to me?"

She laughed. "All but 'look sharp,'" she said. "I'm hungry. I want my supper."

"You'll come?" he cried joyfully. "Really?"

"What, with *you*, Mr. Orde?"

"You promised," he said.

"Surely not!"

"Yes."

"My dear Mr. Orde, what can you be thinking about? You don't imagine that I would go out to supper with you alone. Fie! What a thing to suggest! I shall really have to set the dog on you;" and she pushed the ugly muzzle of Bertie into view from beneath her coat. "Bark at him, Bertie," she said, "and tell him to behave."

He put his hand on her arm and made her halt.

"You've treated me rottenly," he said in a rage, "and I won't stand it any longer."

"Oh, that's all right," she said, and she disengaged her arm. "Good-night, Mr. Orde. I can get my own cab. I needn't trouble you. Say good-night to the pretty gentleman, ducksie," she added to the little dog. It blinked up

at her and yawned, and she kissed it on its domed skull. "Poor little feller!" she said, addressing it in a baby voice. "Was ums very disappointed 'cause he couldn't sing his little song, then?"

Orde laughed unpleasantly. "Oh," he said, "I expect you'll both manage to get over it."

She looked up. "Yes," she said brightly, "I shouldn't wonder."

"You aren't sorry for me at all," he said, foolishly enough.

"I really don't see why I should be," she said. "I haven't very much to thank you for, have I? It's not much credit to anybody to have appeared in such a piece, is it? Or perhaps you think it is?"

This struck him dumb for a moment. When he had recovered he said:

"Well, it'll take *you* all you know to recover from your appearance to-night. If you'd not dried up in your first scene things might have been different. It was that that started them." He felt a strong need of somebody on whom to throw the blame of failure, and he wanted to hurt the girl.

"Ah," she said calmly, "you think this finishes me?"

"Please God!" he said.

"I'm going into the piece at The Broadway," she announced.

"It's a lie," he exclaimed.

"I've the contract, anyway," she replied. This, she felt, sounded more impressive than "Foscari's promise." "It's just a walk-on, you know, but it's good enough—don't you think? Or would you advise me to wait till you've written *another* frost, Ordie?"

He stared at her, muttering. "Infernal," she heard . . . "Infernal."

She turned her back on him and went down the court and out into the street. She hailed a cab and climbed into it, shut the door and, putting her head out, looked through the archway. He stood where she had left him, motionless, staring after her. She put her tongue out at him, and the cab took her home.

CHAPTER XXXII

I

WHEN the curtain came down Michael had experienced only a feeling of boundless relief. The worst had happened ; the play was dead.

But he need no longer go on conducting his music in competition with the loud determined singing of the gallery. He could now leave this theatre ; that was all that, for the moment, he wished to do—to get away. He felt neither despair nor rage—not even disappointment. He seemed to have got over all that sort of thing long ago. He had lived through his great emotions. Now he could only thank Heaven that he was released from the annoyance of conducting music to which no one was listening and which he himself could hardly hear.

He turned round and looked at the busy scene which was going on all over the house. He saw the stalls emptying, the people in the front part of the circle craning their necks to see what was happening upstairs. Everywhere were indignant faces, laughing faces, frightened faces ; but he sought in vain for a sympathetic one. Even Craddock the press agent, who was leaning towards him over the rail and shouting abuse of the British public into his ear, even Craddock was obviously vexed, on his own account and on no other. This meant that Craddock would not be required any longer to work the press on behalf of "The Conspiracy at Capri." Owing to this night's fiasco Craddock was going to be a poorer man than he had hoped. That was all Craddock was thinking about. No wonder he was angry with the British public.

Michael said something in reply to the press agent's

picturesque comments on the situation and turned away. The orchestra was emptying quickly as the bandsmen filed out to case their instruments under the stage. Since the play was a failure there was no reason for them to wait and cry about it. Some of them would get home to their wives rather earlier than they had expected ; others would have a little longer to spend in bars than they had hoped for, ere they took their omnibuses and trains to their suburbs. One and all they were anxious to get out of the theatre. It was not amusing to these bandsmen to see the house making an exhibition of itself. They wanted to forget as soon as possible that they had been concerned with so miserable a business as the first and only night of "*The Conspiracy.*"

As Michael got his hat and coat, one or two of them told him they were sorry, and offered various explanations of the catastrophe. One said it was the book—not half good enough for the music. Another said it was Old Joe's fault : he hadn't played up for nuts. A third said it was because somebody had brought an umbrella on to the stage at the dress-rehearsal, and asked Michael to observe that, at the time, he, this bandsman, had predicted failure for the piece. All who spoke to Michael said something complimentary about the music ; for this was their department, and they were unwilling to think that it could have been in any way at fault. Michael thanked them and went up on to the stage. It was already empty and dark. The stage hands had gone, for Burke had told them they needn't worry about setting the scene for the first act of to-morrow's performance. There wasn't going to be any performance to-morrow, he had said. He told them they would get a fortnight's pay, and this cheered them up a good deal. As they were to get a fortnight's pay there seemed to be nothing to keep them from the nearest public-house ; so they went away.

Michael sat down on that rock-piece, about the position of which Burke had been so particular, and lit a cigarette. He looked round him at the grey shapeless bits of scenery which, when lit up, made such a beautiful and entirely untrue picture of the Blue Grotto at Capri. Unable to bear the contemplation of the stage, he rose, went to the curtain,

and looked through the peephole. He perceived that the darkened house was emptying rapidly. All the fun was over. By the gallery rail a few boys only remained, hopeful of amusement to the last, as boys are. By one of the stalls' entrances a tall man in evening dress was giving a glass of water to a well-clad elderly woman. Near by hovered a programme-seller, expectant of her tip and trying to look as if she were anxious about the lady's health.

Michael shut his fist and shook it at the house.

"All right," he muttered, "that's our first little affair together. But I'll make you—I'll make you——" He turned to a footstep and saw Burke's stout figure crossing to the property-room. He was instantly ashamed of himself. He suspected that he had been caught in the act of being foolish and dramatic.

"Hullo, Burke!" he called.

"That you, Mikky?" said the producer. "Good! Just let me get my hat out of here, and then you're coming out for a drink with me." He disappeared into the property-room.

Michael waited a moment or two, and then went over to see what the devil the fellow was doing. If he was coming out for a drink, let him come and be hanged to him!

"You coming, Burke?" he asked, controlling his voice. He felt a savage desire for whiskey.

"Half a second," said Burke, who was pulling things about. "I swear I put that hat in here. What the devil do you suppose Henry has done with it? And the fool's gone home." Like the band and the stage hands, the property-man had discovered no reason for denying himself his beer any longer than was necessary.

Michael understood that, for the moment, his hat was for Burke the most important thing in the world. Burke came towards him and stood just inside the door of the property-room.

"It's an amazing thing, Mikky," he said. "What can have come to that hat? I remember perfectly well hanging it on that peg, the third there. The other two are a bit loose, you see. What the devil *do* you fancy Henry has done with it?"

Michael was about to make some useless suggestion or other when he saw that Orde was coming across the stage. He did not wish to speak to Orde at all, so he left Burke abruptly and went out through the iron door.

His eye was caught by the notice on the baize board which hung by the street door. He read it twice through. It was short and business-like, and was worded thus :

“NOTICE.

There will be no more performances of ‘The Conspiracy at Capri.’ All members of the Company who have not been guaranteed will receive a fortnight’s salary on calling at the theatre to-morrow.

Signed,

CLARENCE FARQUHARSON.”

As he was beginning to read it a third time the street door swung and the sergeant appeared.

“Ah, Mr. ‘Offman,’ he said, “I was looking for you, sir. Lady waiting for you, sir.”

Michael, as he followed the man through the door, wondered what fool of a woman this could be. In the course of the past week many people had sought interviews with him for one object or another, but it seemed very odd that anyone should be doing so—now.

“Jus’ outside, sir,” said the sergeant confidentially. “An’ if I may say so, Mr. ‘Offman, sir, without offence, sir—very sorry, sir, indeed . . .”

“That’s all right, sergeant,” said Michael wearily. “Here, have a drink, won’t you ?” He slipped half a crown into the man’s ready palm and escaped to find Linda standing under the gas lamp.

II

He took her arm without a word, and they went together down the court. It didn’t surprise him at all to find her

waiting for him, though he remembered now that he had believed that he had persuaded her not to attend the performance. Simply, he had not persuaded her. She had been in the house. He was glad ; it would save them a lot of explanations. Like himself, she knew the worst about "The Conspiracy." He hoped she wouldn't want to find excuses ; he didn't think she would, for he had much confidence in Linda.

It occurred to him that he had not hitherto thought about her at all in connection with the failure of his play. It was odd, that ! For Linda's sake he had been working on the thing all this time ; for her sake he had endured (pretending to be pleased with it) the whole miserable, disastrous business of the production ; for her sake he had been faithful to his music and his chorus and taken the stick that night with his eyes open, to lead the company to defeat. And between the moment of climbing into the conductor's seat and the present one, he had never given her a thought. He wondered why. She was everything to him. He had only wanted to succeed that he might spend on her the money he would make. He was sure of this. Yet only now did he realise that there would be no money to spend—that they were going to be just as poor as they had been, that he was not going, for example, to take Linda to Capri next spring.

It was strange, also, that this didn't seem to matter at all. Her hand, tucked inside his elbow, was all that counted just at present. She was there, beside him, hugging his arm—the only person on God's green earth who mourned, wholly for his sake, that the play had failed. Again he wondered why he had never given her a thought all through the performance. It shamed him to remember it.

"I was so afraid I'd miss you," she was saying ; "I simply couldn't get out of the gallery."

"Oh, you were up there, then ?"

"Yes. Among all those beasts. I tried again and again to get past them, but they just stood and blocked the way, yelling and singing and laughing, and didn't pay the slightest attention to me. Oh, I could have killed them when I saw you go out of the orchestra and I was still up there ! I *had* to get to you, Michael."

"Well, you've done it," he said, "so it's all right now," and he patted the hand that lay within his arm. "I'm glad you were there."

"You didn't really believe that I'd gone home?"

"I swear I did," he said, with a laugh. "I thought you were very sensible. I'm glad you weren't."

"I argued it this way," she said. "So long as you thought I wasn't in the theatre you wouldn't be nervous, as you threatened. And you couldn't possibly know that I was there. And I *had* to go. I was late, but I got in. I got in." She didn't say that she had stood all through the performance.

"Will you eat now," said Michael, "or will you stroll? We've plenty of time before the restaurants close." She saw that he wanted to stroll, so, though she was very tired, she said that she wanted air rather than food.

"So do I," he said. "Let's go down to the Embankment. As failures in life's battle it seems the proper direction. Besides, it's dark and fairly lonely there, and I must kiss you or perish, Linda. I want to forget everything except that I've got you to work for."

"It's a long way to the Embankment," she said.

He laughed and kissed her where they were, just in the archway of the court. The last bandsman, affecting not to notice, slipped discreetly past them and went out into the brightly lit street. They followed him and, without speaking, again made their way, through the crowds on the pavement, to a little dark street which ran down hill. At its end they could see the river and its lights and the big flashing trams going by.

"Lord! Lord!" he said as they went down this street. "How tired I am! Let's hurry. Let's get some clean air in our lungs, quick." He ran with her down the hill and soon they leaned against the parapet of the Embankment, looking out together across the river. His arm was round her, and she snuggled close to his side. "This is better," he said, and kissed her again. "Much better."

"Yes," said Linda, and they were silent for a while, with their backs to theatre-land.

"I suppose," he said presently, "that I ought to say something worthy of the occasion. I've had my Chance,

and I've taken it, and what's the result ? Here we are, knocked down, with everything to begin all over again. About half a year's work clean lost ; the best music that I've ever written chucked on the rubbish-heap, and every manager in London aware that I'm the composer of the worst failure of the year. That's the result. I'm sure I ought to be waving my arms about and calling down the vengeance of Heaven upon somebody. It's not decent to be feeling as I do."

"And how *do* you feel ?" she asked, perceiving that he wished to tell her.

He took his arm from about her and stretched himself luxuriously.

"Why, that I don't care a hang ! That's how. I'm only glad that it's all over. We've done with it. We can begin something else. We know more about it than we did. We won't make the same mistakes again. I've had my Chance, have I ? Well, I'll have another—I'll make it as I made this one—only I'll make it better. My soul, Linda ! They can't knock out people like you and me. We'll have at 'em again. *We will, Linda ;*" and he smote the parapet with his open palm. "You and I."

"Go on," she said. She was there to listen, not to talk.

"This play," he said, "was messed up. Who did it ? Was it Orde ? Was it Psyche Whittaker ? Was it your friends in the gallery ? Not a bit. It was me. Orde just did what might have been expected of him, so did Psyche, so did the gallery. Orde can't help being an ass ; Psyche can't help being a cat ; the gallery can't help making a row when it thinks it's been defrauded. It was perfectly right to make a row. We offered it a rotten play. And Psyche's quite right to be a cat : that's her business in the world, just as Orde's is to be an ass. Orde looks on art as a means to one end—call it position ; Psyche as a means to another—say excitement ; the gallery as a means to a third—its own entertainment. None of these people know or care anything about art at all. But what about me ? I'm supposed to see a little further into things than they—and I do. Yet I just went to work as if music were nothing more than so much cocoa—a thing to sell and make a pot of money or a heap of fame out of.

I loathed Orde because he did this very thing, and I took him as my collaborator because he could put me on the stage—not in the least because I thought he could write a good book. It was his money I wanted. I sold myself to the devil. I thought I was clever enough to control natural forces. Well, I'm not the first fool who's discovered that that's not possible. Orde's been too many for me, Linda, and I'm glad of it. It shows that the natural forces are all right, and that gives one confidence. And now," he said, "don't let's talk about the infernal play any more. I'm going to forget it and everything connected with the stage. When will you marry me ? "

"When can we ? " she said.

"Any time. How long is it ? A week. Three weeks. I must look it up. Anyhow, you give old Whittaker notice to-morrow—"

"Michael," she broke in, "I can tell you now ;" and she told him. But she said nothing about the short rations of the past weeks.

He never imagined that she could have gone short.

"So that's why you've looked so fagged at night," he cried, when the story was told. "Trailing about looking for jobs all day. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Linda ! Why didn't you tell me ? "

"I didn't want to worry you," she said.

"Idiot ! " he told her roughly, by way of reward. She was ready to weep, but his arm went round her again, and, "Little fool ! " he whispered, and kissed her five or six times—which was all she needed.

For some time after this they leant against the parapet and looked over the river at the black mass of the Surrey shore, where the illuminated signs on the shot-towers spelt themselves out, over and over again, upon the blackness of the sky. Linda absorbed herself in the contemplation of these trivialities. She was too happy to think. The play had failed, but she had Michael to herself again, and she would not have to look for work to-morrow.

"Well," said Michael presently, in pursuance, one may suppose, of his resolution to talk about his play no more, "'The Conspiracy's' dead. Heaven rest its poor soul ! It was no good, anyway. There were bright spots in it ;

that waltz, now, and one or two other numbers. But I've learned a lot this last two months, Linda, and I know that 'The Conspiracy' wasn't good enough. It was the story that was wrong, principally. Old-fashioned, it was. They want something rather more unexpected nowadays than caskets containing proofs of the identity of the soprano with the long-lost princess. Now, if I could only find a decent play-maker and a good manager to back us, I've a pretty good little idea that we could all work out together." He turned from the river, put his elbows on the edge of the parapet and, leaning thus, his eyes on the flare of the Strand, he went on : "The setting would be Russian. Why they've never had a Russian play I can't see, and it's bound to come. The only trouble is that someone may get in ahead of me. Just let me give you a rough outline of the plot, Linda . . ."

THE END

